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MANHUNT

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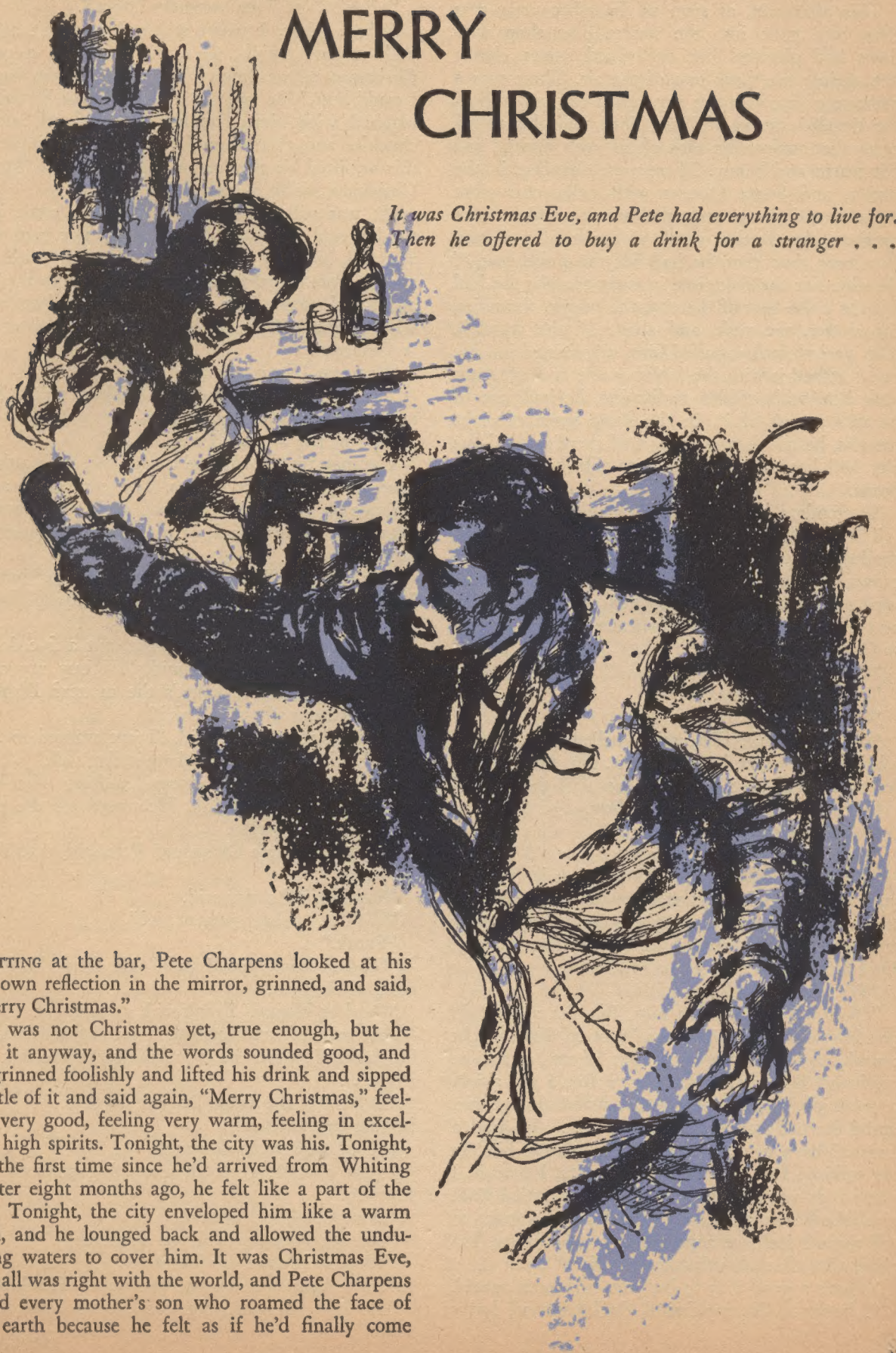
THE MERRY, MERRY CHRISTMAS

by EVAN HUNTER

It was Christmas Eve, and Pete had everything to live for. Then he offered to buy a drink for a stranger . . .



SITTING at the bar, Pete Charpens looked at his own reflection in the mirror, grinned, and said, "Merry Christmas."

It was not Christmas yet, true enough, but he said it anyway, and the words sounded good, and he grinned foolishly and lifted his drink and sipped a little of it and said again, "Merry Christmas," feeling very good, feeling very warm, feeling in excellent high spirits. Tonight, the city was his. Tonight, for the first time since he'd arrived from Whiting Center eight months ago, he felt like a part of the city. Tonight, the city enveloped him like a warm bath, and he lounged back and allowed the undulating waters to cover him. It was Christmas Eve, and all was right with the world, and Pete Charpens loved every mother's son who roamed the face of the earth because he felt as if he'd finally come

home, finally found the place, finally found himself.

It was a good feeling.

This afternoon, as soon as the office party was over, he'd gone into the streets. The shop windows had gleamed like pot-bellied stoves, cherry hot against the sharp bite of the air. There was a promise of snow in the sky, and Pete had walked the tinseled streets of New York with his tweed coat collar against the back of his neck, and he had felt warm and happy. There were shoppers in the streets, and Santa Clauses with bells, and giant wreaths and giant trees, and music coming from speakers, the timeless carols of the holiday season. But more than that, he had felt the pulse beat of the city. For the first time in eight months, he had felt the pulse beat of the city, the people, the noise, the clutter, the rush, and above all the warmth. The warmth had engulfed him, surprising him. He had watched it with the foolish smile of a spectator and then, with sudden realization, he had known he was a part of it. In the short space of eight months, he had become a part of the city—and the city had become a part of him. He had found a home.

"Bartender," he said.

The bartender ambled over. He was a big red-headed man with freckles all over his face. He moved with economy and grace. He seemed like a very nice guy who probably had a very nice wife and family decorating a Christmas tree somewhere in Queens.

"Yes, sir?" he asked.

"Pete. Call me Pete."

"Okay, Pete."

"I'm not drunk," Pete said, "believe me. I know all drunks say that, but I mean it. I'm just so damn happy I could bust. Did you ever feel that way?"

"Sure," the bartender said, smiling.

"Let me buy a drink."

"I don't drink."

"Bartenders never drink, I know, but let me buy you one. Please. Look, I want to thank people, you know? I want to thank everybody in this city. I want to thank them for being here, for making it a city. Do I sound nuts?"

"Yes," the bartender said.

"Okay. Okay then, I'm nuts. But I'm a hick, do you know? I came here from Whiting Center eight months ago. Straw sticking out of my ears. The confusion here almost killed me. But I got a job, a good job, and I met a lot of wonderful people, and I learned how to dress, and I . . . I found a home. That's corny. I know it. That's the hick in me talking. But I love this damn city, I *love* it. I want to go around kissing girls in the streets. I want to shake hands with every guy I meet. I want to tell them I feel like a person, a human being, I'm alive, alive! For Christ's sake, I'm alive!"

"That's a good way to be," the bartender agreed.

"I know it. Oh, my friend, do I know it! I was dead in Whiting Center, and now I'm here and alive and . . . look, let me buy you a drink, huh?"

"I don't drink," the bartender insisted.

"Okay. Okay, I won't argue. I wouldn't argue with anyone tonight. Gee, it's gonna be a great Christmas, do you know? Gee, I'm so damn happy I could bust." He laughed aloud, and the bartender laughed with him. The laugh trailed off into a chuckle, and then a smile. Pete looked into the mirror, lifted his glass again, and again said, "Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas."

He was still smiling when the man came into the bar and sat down next to him. The man was very tall, his body bulging with power beneath the suit he wore. Coatless, hatless, he came into the bar and sat alongside Pete, signaling for the bartender with a slight flick of his hand. The bartender walked over.

"Rye neat," the man said.

The bartender nodded and walked away. The man reached for his wallet.

"Let me pay for it." Pete said.

The man turned. He had a wide face with a thick nose and small brown eyes. The eyes came as a surprise in his otherwise large body. He studied Pete for a moment and then said, "You a queer or something?"

Pete laughed. "Hell, no," he said. "I'm just happy. It's Christmas Eve, and I feel like buying you a drink."

The man pulled out his wallet, put a five dollar bill on the bar top and said, "I'll buy my own drink." He paused. "What's the matter? Don't I look as if I can afford a drink?"

"Sure you do," Pete said. "I just wanted to . . . look, I'm happy. I want to share it, that's all."

The man grunted and said nothing The bartender brought his drink. He tossed off the shot and asked for another.

"My name's Pete Charpens," Pete said, extending his hand.

"So what?" the man said.

"Well . . . what's your name?"

"Frank."

"Glad to know you, Frank." He thrust his hand closer to the man.

"Get lost, Happy," Frank said.

Pete grinned, undismayed. "You ought to relax," he said, "I mean it. You know, you've got to stop . . ."

"Don't tell me what I've got to stop. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Pete Charpens. I told you."

"Take a walk, Pete Charpens. I got worries of my own."

"Want to tell me about them?"

"No, I don't want to tell you about them."

"Why not? Make you feel better."

"Go to hell, and stop bothering me," Frank said.

The bartender brought the second drink. He

sipped at it, and then put the shot glass on the bar top.

"Do I look like a hick?" Pete asked.

"You look like a goddamn queer," Frank said.

"No, I mean it."

"You asked me, and I told you."

"What's troubling you, Frank?"

"You a priest or something?"

"No, but I thought . . ."

"Look, I come in here to have a drink. I didn't come to see the chaplain."

"You an ex-Army man?"

"Yeah."

"I was in the Navy," Pete said. "Glad to be out of that, all right. Glad to be right here where I am, in the most wonderful city in the whole damn world."

"Go down to Union Square and get a soap box," Frank said.

"Can't I help you, Frank?" Pete asked. "Can't I buy you a drink, lend you an ear, do something? You're so damn sad, I feel like . . ."

"I'm not sad."

"You sure look sad. What happened? Did you lose your job?"

"No, I didn't lose my job."

"What do you do, Frank?"

"Right now, I'm a truck driver. I used to be a fighter."

"Really? You mean a boxer? No kidding?"

"Why would I kid you?"

"What's your last name?"

"Blake."

"Frank Blake? I don't think I've heard it before. Of course, I didn't follow the fights much."

"Tiger Blake, they called me. That was my ring name."

"Tiger Blake. Well, we didn't have fights in Whiting Center. Had to go over to Waterloo if we wanted to see a bout. I guess that's why I never heard of you."

"Sure," Frank said.

"Why'd you quit fighting?"

"They made me."

"Why?"

"I killed a guy in 1947."

Pete's eyes widened. "In the ring?"

"Of course in the ring. What the hell kind of a moron are you, anyway? You think I'd be walking around if it wasn't in the ring? Jesus!"

"Is that what's troubling you?"

"There ain't nothing troubling me. I'm fine."

"Are you going home for Christmas?"

"I got no home."

"You must have a home," Pete said gently. "*Everybody's* got a home."

"Yeah? Where's your home? Whiting Center or wherever the hell you said?"

"Nope. This is my home now. New York City. New York, New York. The greatest goddamn city in the whole world."

"Sure," Frank said sourly.

"My folks are dead," Pete said. "I'm an only child. Nothing for me in Whiting Center anymore. But in New York, well, I get the feeling that I'm here to stay. That I'll meet a nice girl here, and marry her, and raise a family here and . . . and this'll be home."

"Great." Frank said sourly.

"How'd you happen to kill this fellow?" Pete asked suddenly.

"I hit him."

"And killed him?"

"I hit him on the Adam's apple. Accidentally."

"Were you sore at him?"

"We were in the ring. I already told you that."

"Sure, but were you sore?"

"A fighter don't have to be sore. He's paid to fight."

"Did you like fighting?"

"I loved it," Frank said flatly.

"How about the night you killed that fellow?"

Frank was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Get lost, huh?"

"I could never fight for money," Pete said. "I got a quick temper, and I get mad as hell, but I could never do it for money. Besides, I'm too happy right now to . . ."

"Get lost," Frank said again, and he turned his back. Pete sat silently for a moment.

"Frank?" he said at last.

"You back again?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked to you about something that's painful to you. Look, it's Christmas Eve. Let's . . ."

"Forget it."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No. I told you no a hundred times. I buy my own damn drinks!"

"This is Christmas E . . ."

"I don't care what it is. You happy jokers give me the creeps. Get off my back, will you?"

"I'm sorry. I just . . ."

"Happy, happy, happy. Grinning like a damn fool. What the hell is there to be so happy about? You got an oil well someplace? A gold mine? What is it with you?"

"I'm just . . ."

"You're just a jerk! I probably pegged you right the minute I laid eyes on you. You're probably a damn queer."

"No, no," Pete said mildly. "You're mistaken, Frank. Honestly, I just feel . . ."

"Your old man was probably a queer, too. Your old lady probably took on every sailor in town."

The smile left Pete's face, and then tentatively reappeared. "You don't mean that, Frank," he said.

"I mean everything I ever say," Frank said. There was a strange gleam in his eyes. He studied Pete carefully.

"About my mother, I meant," Pete said.

"I know what you're talking about. And I'll say it again. She probably took on every sailor in town."

"Don't say that, Frank," Pete said, the smile gone now, a perplexed frown teasing his forehead, appearing, vanishing, reappearing.

"You're a queer, and your old lady was a . . ."

"Stop it, Frank."

"Stop what? If your old lady was . . ."

Pete leaped off the bar stool. "Cut it out!" he yelled.

From the end of the bar, the bartender turned. Frank caught the movement with the corner of his eye. In a cold whisper, he said, "Your mother was a slut," and Pete swung at him.

Frank ducked, and the blow grazed the top of his head. The bartender was coming towards them now. He could not see the strange light in Frank's eyes, nor did he hear Frank whisper again, "A slut, a slut."

Pete pushed himself off the bar wildly. He saw the beer bottle then, picked it up, and lunged at Frank.

The patrolman knelt near his body.

"He's dead, all right," he said. He stood up and dusted off his trousers. "What happened?"

Frank looked bewildered and dazed. "He went berserk," he said. "We were sitting and talking. Quiet. All of a sudden, he swings at me." He turned to the bartender. "Am I right?"

"He was drinking," the bartender said. "Maybe he was drunk."

"I didn't even swing back," Frank said, "not until he picked up the beer bottle. Hell, this is Christmas Eve. I didn't want no trouble."

"What happened when he picked up the bottle?"

"He swung it at me. So I . . . I put up my hands to defend myself. I only gave him a push, so help me."

"Where'd you hit him?"

Frank paused. "In . . . in the throat, I think." He paused again. "It was self-defense, believe me. This guy just went berserk. He musta been a maniac."

"He *was* talking kind of queer," the bartender agreed.

The patrolman nodded sympathetically. "There's more nuts outside than there is in," he said. He turned to Frank. "Don't take this so bad, Mac. You'll get off. It looks open and shut to me. Just tell them the story downtown, that's all.

"Berserk," Frank said. "He just went berserk."

"Well . . ." The patrolman shrugged. "My partner'll take care of the meat wagon when it gets here. You and me better get downtown. I'm sorry I got to ruin your Christmas, but . . ."

"It's *him* that ruined it," Frank said, shaking his head and looking down at the body on the floor.

Together, they started out of the bar. At the door, the patrolman waved to the bartender and said, "Merry Christmas, Mac."

It's Magic

At a show in Gardner, Mass., Carlo Zavante, the magician, pulled a rabbit out of a hat. "Can you produce anything as astonishing as this?" the performer asked. A detective in the audience accepted the challenge. He produced a warrant for Zavante's arrest on a traffic charge, from his pocket.

Timely Warning

A shoplifter in a Denver, Colo., department store slipped an alarm clock under his coat. Before he could reach the door, the alarm went off. He was arrested by a store detective.

Tool of the Trade

New York City police thought an Indian, William W. Martin, 48, was on the warpath when they noticed him walking along the street with a "tomahawk" hanging from his belt. They arrested him for disorderly conduct. The charge was dismissed after Martin explained that he used the hatchet in his business. He's a pineapple crater.

I knew just what I had to do. First, I had to find a woman . . .

BAD WORD

by DAVID ALEXANDER

OH, I KNEW where it was all right. It was within a couple of feet of me.

I wanted the thing so bad I was shaking all over and sweating like a plow horse that's just worked the forty-acre. All I had to do was reach out and open the drawer and pick it up, but I was afraid to. I couldn't tell if it was the True Spirit or the Evil Spirit that was inside of me. I had to be sure, you understand. Preacher Bates used to say that the Devil could get the Evil Spirit inside of you and make you think it was the True Spirit and when that happened you did something that made you burn in hellfire forever and a day.

The thing was right there in the bottom drawer of the chest, behind a pile of socks that needed washing. It had been there since the last time it happened. I'd meant to throw it away, but somehow I couldn't. I kept thinking that the True Spirit might move me and if it did I'd have to have it. So I hid it behind the pile of socks that needed washing. I hadn't washed the socks because I was afraid if I moved them I'd see it and if I saw it, something would happen again.

So I sat there on the edge of the cot in my room at the Y and I kept staring at the drawer where I'd hidden it. I didn't have anything on but my shorts. I'd been getting ready to go down to the shower room and take a bath when the shaking and the sweating hit me and I knew I had to have the thing in the drawer. It was my day off and this time of afternoon there wouldn't be anybody in the showers. I didn't like to take a shower in front of the other fellows because they kidded me. I'm almost old enough to vote but I'm just a few little

inches over five feet tall and I'm so skinny you could play guitar music on my ribs. I dropped my shorts off and I walked over naked toward the closet where my old flannel bathrobe with the moth holes in it was hanging up. On the way I looked at myself in the mirror. I don't know why I always did that when I didn't have my clothes on. It made me ashamed to see myself. It hurt so bad it made me want to cry. But I kept on doing it all the time. It was like when I was a little kid. I'd stick my finger up against a red hot stove and burn it. I knew it was going to hurt but I kept right on doing it.

Maybe it was a good thing to do, I don't know. Preacher Bates always used to say that sinners had to flay their flesh and humble their spirits.

I was such a skinny little runt because I never did have enough to eat when I was growing up, I guess. I couldn't remember a single time when I was a kid that I wasn't hungry. Pop was a tenant farmer down South and he died before I could remember and Mom worked the farm but the soil was rocky and she tired out easy and the chickens weren't good layers. Mostly we lived on poke salad and hominy grits and cornbread. It wasn't once a month we had a little hog jowl. I was so scared of being hungry again that every time I got paid off for my dishwashing job I bought a lot of candy bars and took them up to my room. I didn't smoke or drink, except a little beer now and then, and I washed my own clothes and didn't have bad habits, so I could afford to buy the candy bars. I had them hid in a drawer, a different drawer from the one where I'd hid the thing I wanted so bad.

I thought maybe if I took a shower and finished it off with ice-cold water it would stop me shaking and sweating and wanting the thing. Anyway it might make me think clear so I'd know if it was the True Spirit or the Evil Spirit that was pestering me to get it out from behind the pile of socks. I quit looking in the mirror at myself and got my old bathrobe and put it on.

The shower didn't help me any. As soon as I got back in my room I started wanting the thing again and the sweating and the shaking started all over. I still couldn't be sure if it was the True Spirit or the Evil Spirit that possessed me and was tearing me apart like that. I guess maybe Preacher Bates might have known the difference, but he was dead and there weren't any Revelationists around this part of the country. The Revelationists were all in the South, you understand.

Preacher Bates had come to Clayville, the nearest town to our place, when I was a little kid around twelve years old. He had a new religion he called Revealed Prophecy. He set up a Tabernacle made out of tin and canvas and scrap lumber on a vacant lot near the town dump and he held revival meetings and he called his converts Revelationists. Mom was one of his first converts.

I guess the Preacher was around forty when he first came to Clayville. He was a big hulk of a man, over six feet in his socks. He was rawbone-built with wide, stooped shoulders and arms so long it made you think of a big ape. He had a mane of black hair that he let grow long on his neck. The scariest thing about him was his eyes. They were big and black and it seemed like they popped right out of his head and flashed with lightning when the True Spirit was inside of him and he got excited. He drank corn squeezings out of a Mason jar any time he felt like it and he didn't make any bones about his drinking, either. He said if a man had the True Spirit in him and knew how to handle liquor it sharpened his wits and helped him shout his praise of the Lord. That's one reason I never felt bad about taking a beer now and then. I'd tried taking hard liquor a time or two but it gagged me. I didn't even like beer much, either, tell the truth, but I'd get lonesome sometimes and go into a saloon and sip at a glass just so there'd be people around me and I could hear them talking.

A lot of folks in Clayville, most of them the people we called "Quality," were dead-set against Preacher Bates. They wanted to tear down his Tabernacle and run him out of town. It wasn't just his drinking and ranting that they objected to. He handled live rattlesnakes to prove that a man with the True Spirit inside of him couldn't come to harm and he made his followers handle rattlers, too. I guess some of his followers didn't have the True Spirit, because they got bit and almost died. Maybe I should tell you here that Preacher Bates got bit a few years later and died. He was trying to handle a big bull rattler that was too slippery for him and it sank its fangs right into his bare arm. The Preacher wouldn't go to a doctor. He just tried to cure himself with corn squeezings and prayer and his arm swelled up as big as a middle-sized tree trunk and he died. But that was a long time later.

Some of the people in Clayville also objected to the fact that Preacher Bates let Lenny Foster come to his revival meetings. Lenny was what they call an epileptic and he had conniption fits. The Preacher's ranting and raving would always get him so excited he'd get into a fit and roll on the floor and foam at the mouth. Preacher Bates said Lenny didn't have a disease at all. He said it was because the Awful Truth of the Lord was revealed to him that he had the spells in meeting.

There were so many rednecks like us that got to be followers of the Preacher that the folks in town couldn't do anything about running him out, unless they wanted to risk causing a knock-down-and-drag-out riot.

Preacher Bates used to give some of his converts what he called a Private Revelation. So far as I could tell, he didn't give his Private Revelation to anybody but ladies in the congregation. Mom would invite him out to supper whenever she had hog

jowl on the table. He'd come riding out from town in his second-hand Ford that must have been at least ten years old. After supper, he and Mom would go into the bedroom and shut the door and bolt it and my sister Clarissa and I used to be scared to death because we'd hear groaning and moaning from behind the door. But Mom said that was all part of getting the True Spirit that a Revelationist had to have.

Once when Mom was in town trying to trade a little stuff we'd grown for flour and salt and matches and other things we needed, the Preacher came to the house in the afternoon. My sister Clarissa was just fourteen then. The Preacher said the time had come for Clarissa to have a Private Revelation. He warned her and me that if we ever breathed a word to Mom or anybody about her Revelation we'd be struck down dead and burn in hellfire. He ran me out of the house and took Clarissa into Mom's bedroom. I was scared to death, but I sneaked around back of the house and listened at the window and Clarissa was screaming and sobbing like she was being murdered. After that Preacher Bates came to give Clarissa a Private Revelation every time Mom went to town.

I don't think the Private Revelation could have done Clarissa any good, though. She wasn't even sixteen when she ran away from home and later on Mom heard she was living a life of sin in Memphis. My own sister had become what Preacher Bates said was the worst thing in all the world—a Lewd Woman.

Preacher Bates was around Clayville for about three years before the bull rattler bit him and he died. His converts kept the Tabernacle going but it wasn't the same at all without the Preacher there ranting and raving when the True Spirit was inside of him. The Preacher had only been dead about three months when Mom came down with the ague and passed away. They put me in a county home for a while, but I ran away and headed North and I've been up here in the city ever since, working any kind of job I could to keep the skin and bones together. This dishwashing job has lasted more than three months now and that's the longest I've ever worked at anything.

Sometimes I get these spells. At first I'm sure it's the True Spirit that's moving me and I take the thing that's in the drawer and I go out and I do what I've got to do and then afterward I'm not sure if it was the True Spirit or the Evil Spirit that was speaking to me and I get tormented. I wish there was some real way of knowing, the way Preacher Bates always knew for sure.

I was thinking about Clayville and Mom and Clarissa and Preacher Bates while I sat there in my little room at the Y staring at the drawer where the thing was hidden and wanting it so bad I was about to bust.

I didn't get it right away, though. I got up and put my clothes on first. I put on the only good suit I had. It was a blue serge I'd bought almost new at a second-hand store. It was a little big for me, of course, but it didn't look too bad after I'd had the pants and sleeves cut down. I put on my peaked cap and I started to run out of the room so I wouldn't be tempted to get the thing out of the drawer before I was sure. I had my hand on the doorknob when something happened, something that had really never happened before.

All of a sudden I was *sure*.

I knew that it was the True Spirit I had inside of me this time and that it was urging me to get the thing.

I could see Preacher Bates' big staring eyes blazing at me from a dark corner of the room and I could hear his big bass voice as plain as anything saying, "Get it, boy! Get it!" There couldn't be a mite of doubt about it this time.

I opened the drawer and I pushed aside the pile of socks that needed washing and I got the thing I wanted and I put it in my pocket. I kept my hand in my pocket clasped around it. I was so excited about having it that the palm of my hand was wet and slippery with sweat. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I wasn't a skinny little runt any more. With the thing in my pocket I was twelve feet tall with a halo 'round my head and my eyes were shining as bright and fierce as Preacher Bates' used to shine.

I was wearing rubber-soled sneakers because they're about the cheapest kind of shoes that you can buy, but when I went downstairs and out to the street I was walking on clouds. I was surprised to find that the world outside was dark and rainy. It had been a bright, sunshiny afternoon when I first started thinking about the thing and wanting it. I must have been sitting on that little cot for hours just staring at the drawer where it was hidden, and wanting it, and thinking about Mom and Clarissa and Preacher Bates. Now it was night. That was kind of a Sign, too. It had always been night when it had happened before.

The rain was a fine, steady mist. It soaked through my clothes by the time I'd walked a few blocks, but I didn't even notice it. To me the rain was like Holy Water the Angels were spraying down on me because I'd had the Revelation and the True Spirit was inside of me.

I walked and walked and I didn't know where I was going. I didn't care. Sometimes I'd hear a teeny Voice, like an echo from a long way off, and it would tell me to turn a corner or cross a street, and I'd obey. I knew I was being led. I was sure I'd know when I reached the right place. It was the very first time that I'd been absolutely sure it was the True Spirit inside of me and I rejoiced. I wanted to sing and shout and jump up and down the way we used to do at the revival meetings. I hadn't eaten anything for hours but I wasn't hun-

gry.

My hand could feel the thing there in my pocket and that was all that mattered.

I don't know how long or how far I walked. I walked through streets with houses and streets with stores. I walked through streets that were dark as pitch and streets that shone with light. The Voice kept saying "Farther! Farther!" and I kept walking and never grew tired and never cared a bit how wet I was.

Once or twice I thought I might have come to the place I was meant to seek. There was a young girl, about my age, I guess, standing under an awning. She had a silk dress on and it was so wet it was plastered to her body and it made her look like a Lewd Woman. But the Voice was just a whisper and I couldn't understand the words, so I just stopped for a minute in the shadows near to her and then I went on again. When I did, I heard the Voice again and I knew I had been right. Another time I was on a dark street and it smelled of a fish market that was on the corner and the buildings were the kind that real poor people live in. I saw a woman sitting in a lighted window. She was wearing a kimono and it was open so you could see part of her bosom and she was smoking a cigarette and I waited for the Voice to tell me if this was the place, but I didn't hear it, so I went on again. Once I heard something like a whispering or hissing and I stopped and listened and then I realized it was my own breath coming fast because I'd walked so far.

Then I was on a real dark street and it was near the docks. There was a fog now and the fog horns were tooting out on the river and it was a real sad and mournful sound like the chanting the Revelationists set up when they lowered Mom into her grave. It was so dark down here you couldn't see your hand in front of you. Once I stumbled off a curbing and almost fell.

Then I saw the light. It was gleaming there in the darkness and it was as bright as Preacher Bates' eyes used to get when he was preaching one of his hellfire-damnation sermons. All of a sudden the foghorns and the wash of water and the splash of rain blended into one big sound and it was the Voice and it wasn't whispering any more. It was shouting at me that this was the place I'd been sent to find.

The light was an electric sign outside a bar. I hurried toward it and when I got there I had to stand for a minute because I was so out of breath. And all of a sudden I was weak, too, and I was afraid I might faint, so I took a chocolate bar out of my pocket and gobbled it. Then I went into the bar.

It was a dismal-looking place with sawdust on the floor. The bartender was a fat man in a dirty apron. There were three or four men in work clothes drinking at the bar. And there was a woman. As soon as I saw the woman, I knew I had come to the right place.

She was about thirty, I guess, with dyed yellow hair. She was plump and she had a dress that fit her like the skin on a sausage and it was cut real low so you could see the upper part of her bosom. I didn't think she had a thing on under it.

Oh, she was a Lewd Woman. I knew that for sure.

She was a little bit drunk and she was talking and screeching and laughing too loud. I went up and sat down on a stool next to her and told the bartender to give me a beer.

This woman turned and looked at me and she let out a shriek of laughter and she said to the bartender, "Hey, Harry! You order shrimps for dinner? The fishmarket sent us a shrimp. Look at it, Harry. It must be fresh-caught, because it's still dripping wet."

I didn't say anything. I just sat and waited for the beer the bartender was drawing from the tap.

The woman yelled, "Hey, Harry! You ain't going to serve Shrimpie a beer, are you? He ain't big enough to drink. Why, my kid brother was bigger than Shrimpie when he was ten years old."

The guys at the bar laughed, like it was a big joke. I squeezed the thing in my pocket so hard it hurt my hand. The bartender walked toward me with a beer glass in his hand. The foam was slopping down the sides of the glass. He said, "In this joint anybody that can pay gets served."

I put a dollar bill on the bar.

Before the bartender had a chance to take it, the woman grabbed it. She stuffed it down the neck of her dress and let out a shriek of laughter.

Harry stood in front of me holding the beer. He said, "You gonna fish for your buck or pay me out of your pocket?"

The woman said, "You dare reach for that dollar, Shrimpie, and I'll holler copper!"

I looked at her. I was so mad I was about to bust. I kept squeezing the thing in my pocket. I guess the look on my face must have scared her. She took the bill out and she said, "Tell you what, Shrimpie. You buy me a Scotch and I'll put your buck on the bar."

Harry looked at me and I nodded. There wasn't anything else to do. After all, this was the Lewd Woman I was meant to meet.

She drank down her Scotch before I had taken two sips of beer. The bartender gave me thirty cents change.

A big guy wearing khaki work clothes and a windbreaker walked down the bar. He grabbed hold of the woman and spun her around on the stool.

"How's about a little fun for free, Gert?" he said.

The woman slapped him hard in the face and wrenched free of the hold he had on her.

"Take your dirty paws off me!" she yelled. "If you want to see Gertie, come around on payday!"

The big guy laughed and went out the door.

The woman said a dirty word that made me blush. I'd always been taught that saying bad words was one of the worst sins there is. You burn in hellfire forever and a day if you say bad words.

The woman said, "Drink it up, Shrimpie. Haven't you got another buck? Gertie needs another drink. A bird can't fly on one wing, you know."

I gulped down my beer and it made my stomach feel queasy. I put another dollar on the bar.

Gert said, "You ain't so bad, Shrimpie, even if you're knee-high to a flea. You got some more money in your pocket, honey? You buy Gertie a few drinks and maybe we can have some fun."

I told her I had a little more money. I had to stay with her, you understand. If she'd walked down the bar and started drinking with one of the big guys, it would have spoiled everything.

The woman kind of snuggled up against me. I could feel her knee against mine, and her plump hip. Her hip was so warm I could feel the heat even through my wet clothes.

Being close to her like that made me dizzy. I'd never felt like that the other times it had happened. That proved the True Spirit was in me, I guess. She had a real strong perfume on her and the smell of that made me feel dizzy, too. I began to shake so bad I had to clamp my teeth together to keep them from chattering.

I drank more beer than I'd ever drunk all at once before and the woman kept drinking Scotches and pretty soon nearly every bit of the pay I had left was gone. I was getting desperate. The woman was real drunk now. There wasn't anybody left in the bar except the woman and me and the bartender and a real old man down at the other end who had gone off to sleep.

I said to the woman, "Let's get out of here."

She said, "Have you got some money, honey? It'll cost five bucks if you want to come up to my room."

I told her I had five bucks. I did have. I had held it out to pay for my room. The rent was due the next day. The woman made me show her the five. She laughed when I had to undo a safety pin that was holding it to my underwear shirt.

There was still some change on the bar and she made me buy her another Scotch with that. Then she went over to a hatrack and got a rain cape and an umbrella and we left.

It was still raining hard.

She said we couldn't get a taxi down here in this neighborhood. She took hold of my arm and kind of leaned against me. She was staggering. We must have walked about six blocks, I guess, and turned a couple of corners. I didn't have any idea where we were, but I didn't care. Everything was working out just perfect this time. I didn't need to find an alley, the way I'd had to do the other times it happened.

She came to a beat-up brownstone house with a sign in the window that said *Rooms*. She put a key in the front door and we went inside. The hall stank. Somebody had been frying onions. There was an open garbage pail just inside the hall and that stank, too. And there was another smell that reminded me of the little frame shack where Mom and Clarissa and I had lived together down South. It's the smell old wood gets when the dry rot sets in.

We didn't see anybody in the house. We went up three flights of squeaky stairs. Once or twice the woman staggered and almost fell backward on me.

Finally she unlocked another door.

We went into a little room that was just about big enough for a brass bed and a bureau and a chair. Dirty white curtains and a green blind covered the window. There was wallpaper, but it was so smudged you could hardly tell what the design had been. The woman had pictures of movie actors pinned to the wallpaper. They'd been cut out of magazines.

I stood just inside the door, with my back up against it. I was dizzy and I was winded and breathing hard. I had my hand clutched tight around the thing in my pocket. I think that was all that kept me from falling down in a dead faint. I hadn't ever been alone in a room with a woman like this before. The room had a funny smell. It was a woman-smell, I guess.

The woman took off her wet cape and stood her umbrella in a corner and sat down on the edge of the brass bed. She sat there panting for a minute, then she held out her hand and rubbed two fingers against her thumb.

"Dig out the money, honey," she said. Then she laughed. "Business before pleasure," she said.

I took a step toward her. It was going to happen any minute now. I forgot how tired and dizzy I was. This was what I'd been waiting for all my life. This was going to be better than all the other times, because I was alone with her in a room with a shade pulled over the window and a locked door behind me.

The woman's eyes narrowed when I took the step toward her. She said, "Hey, I don't like that look in your eyes. You ain't a psycho, are you?"

I took another step. She yelled, "Get out! Get out of here! I don't want any part of you!"

I took the thing out of my pocket.

When she saw it, she tried to scream, but the scream choked in her throat. Then she began to talk to me fast, but her voice was kind of a croak.

"Wait! Don't come any closer! Put that thing away! You won't have to pay, understand? It's for free. Wait, now! Wait just a second!"

She was pulling her dress over her head. Like I'd thought, there wasn't a thing under it. It was

the first time in all my life I'd ever seen a woman like that.

"See?" she said. Her eyes were wild and she was scared to death. "You don't need that thing. You don't need money. Just put that thing away and come here, honey!"

I held the thing in my hand and took another step. I was so close now I could feel the heat of her body and smell the perfume on her naked flesh.

Her face was crazy with fear now. When she spoke, her voice wasn't much more than a whisper.

"What—what are you going to do to me?" she asked.

I don't know why, but I went crazy when she asked me that. She never should have asked me that.

"By God, I'll tell you what I'm going to do!" I said. "By God, I'm going to . . ."

And I told her what I was going to do.

And then I was doing it.

It was like the other times it had happened. Once it started I blacked out and didn't come to until it was all over.

When I came to, I was standing on my feet, but I was swaying and the room was spinning around me. I had to balance myself against the bed. I was panting like a winded horse. I was sweating and shaking again, too.

The woman was on the floor at my feet. There was blood all over her.

There was blood on the thing—the switch knife—in my hand, too. There was blood on my hand and blood on my good suit and blood on my sneakers.

I felt terrible. I was scared, because I knew I'd committed a mortal sin and there'd be no forgiveness. I was sure to burn in hellfire forever and a day.

Oh, I didn't mind about the woman. She was a Lewd Woman and it was the True Spirit inside of me that had sent me out to find her. I'd only done what the Voice had told me to do.

But the woman had made me sin before I purified her. She had made me say a bad word.

It was all her fault.

"What are you going to do to me?" Why did she have to ask me that?

I'd told her what I was going to do. I'd said a bad word.

By God, I'd said.

I'd taken the name of the Lord in vain.

Mom never would have liked that. She wouldn't have liked it a little bit.

My Mom was a real religious woman.

Custom

Five College of Pacific fraternity pledges in Oroville, Calif., arrested for theft, explained that it was traditional for them to make off with the school bell as part of their initiation. "It's also traditional to jail burglary suspects," the officers replied.

Sales Resistance

A magazine subscription salesman complained to the Warren, O., sheriff after a housewife answered his knock with a pistol in her hand, then kept it pointed at him until he left. He said his sales talk was "brief and unsuccessful."

Bootlegging Bust

Six moonshiners began serving prison terms recently after a trial in Federal court at Greensboro, N. C., and an adventure in frustration. First of all, they miscalculated their expenses and lost money on their sales. But the climax came when they hired a revenue agent to take care of their still. The agent was the principal witness at their trial.

Time on His Hands

News dispatches from Vienna, Austria, report the case of the man who was arrested for having too much time. Lajos Koeroesi, 28, was charged after police found 3,000 alarm clocks in his home. The clocks had been stolen from the factory where Koeroesi was employed.

THE SCAVENGERS

Marty and Hank were really in clover, with the dame full of booze and in the car. But then they got greedy . . .

by

RICHARD HARPER

ONE MOMENT the road was empty, deserted except for the rain pouring out of the night and pelting the black asphalt in long slanting sheets; then twin beams of light came reaching through the wetness and tires sang on the shiny paving as a car hurtled through the night.

Ahead, a curve. Too fast, too late, tires gripping frantically at the slick pavement, skidding, sliding, splintering through the white guard rail, leaping into darkness. . . .

And the road was empty again. And the rain continued to fall, tapping like cold metallic fingers on the hood and roof of a strip-down Mercury that was parked in the shelter of a grove of trees nearby, its insides spilling out a muffled mambo mingled with youthful voices and loose, girlish laughter.

Marty raised his head and looked over at Hank. "You hear that?"

Hank grunted. "Hear what, man?" His head was on the shoulder of the chick snuggled on the seat between them, a bottle tilted to her mouth.

"That noise," Marty mumbled. "Sounded like some jerk didn't make the curve."

Hank shrugged. "So some jerk didn't make the curve. Gi'me." He pulled the bottle from the chick's hand. She giggled, giddy-eyed.

Marty shook his head. Drinking always made him fuzzy upstairs, but it seemed like he got his craziest ideas when he was a little high. Like tonight. Grabbing off this high class chick and getting her soused and doing real crazy things

with her. Only now he'd heard the sound of the car not making the curve and another idea was boiling up inside him, fast.

He looked over at Hank again. "Let's go see," he said.

Hank scowled, his reddish duck-tailed hair ruffled from the chick's fingers. "You nuts, man? We got a real live thing here." He winked and nodded at the chick. "C'mon, man, you don't wanna leave this."

The chick reached out, her hand cool on Marty's cheek, stroking. "Please, Marty."

Marty looked away. "I got somethin' crazier."

Hank burped. "What's crazier, man? What's crazier than this?"

Marty looked at the chick between them. Hank was right about one thing. She sure was a living doll. Even with her dark hair all mussed and her lipstick smeared and her skirt and blouse all pulled loose, rumpled. And they'd gone to a lot of trouble to get her fractured. He sat there, remembering how the whole deal had started out real cool earlier in the evening with him and Hank muscling in on a fancy garden party up in the ritzy Glen Oaks district and liberating this doll. Just walked right up to the geek she was dancing with and steered them both behind a hedge where it was real private-like and Hank started to hang one on him when what did the stupid jerk do but cover up his face with his hands and start blubbering. Christ, it made Marty sick just thinking about it. The guy had a good ten pounds on Hank and there he was all covered up and sniveling like an old woman. So they'd just turned around and walked off with his chick. And the best part of the whole play was that the chick, already flying high on vodka, hadn't seemed to mind a bit.

They'd cruised on up into the hills here near Monterey Park and parked their bomb in the trees off the road, and with the rain coming down like golfballs and the radio rocking loud and sweet they'd really got to tilting the bottle and warming up to this high class living doll who was really turning out to be pretty ordinary when you got down to the basic essentials, when along come these headlights and this car roaring out of the rain and night and this squeal and noise like wood and metal tearing, and just like that Marty had got this even crazier idea.

He switched on the ignition, pumped the accelerator. The engine roared. "Hey," Hank yelled. "You serious? What we gonna do?"

"See a jerk about a car wreck," Marty said.

"But it's rainin', man!"

"Aw, Marty," the chick pouted.

They gunned out from under the trees and wheeled around and drove on up to the curve and Marty pulled the car off on the shoulder and parked beside the splintered break in the guard rail. He glanced at the chick, "Wait here."

The chick just made with a sloppy grin and Marty and Hank piled out of their bomb into the rain that was coming down in buckets and stood beside the broken rail. Thumbs hooked in their back pockets, they stared down the embankment, and Hank gave out with a long low whistle. "Hey, man, what a crazy wreck!"

The car was there, at the bottom of the ravine. Flipped and lying like a fat black bug on its back, steaming, hissing in the rain, doors sprung open, wheels still spinning wildly, and one headlight glaring bright like an eye in the night.

Marty looked at Hank and their eyes met and held, cold and bright and hard, Marty's idea leaping like a spark between them.

Hank grinned big. "I get ya now. Man, this'll really be the craziest."

"Yeah," Marty said. "Bring the light."

Hank went to the car and came back with flashlight in his hand. He was scowling. "The chick says she don't feel so good."

Marty shrugged. "Let her play it cool awhile. This won't take long."

"Something else."

"What?"

"Suppose somebody comes. Suppose they stop to see what happened?"

"So somebody comes. The car's blocking the hole in the rail. They won't stop."

"But suppose they do, man?"

Marty looked at him long and hard in the darkness. "What are you, Hank," he said slowly, "a chicken or a hawk? You wanna lam out?"

They stood there in the soaking rain and darkness beside the rail and finally Hank shrugged, "Naw, man, this is the craziest yet."

"Then, c'mon."

They skidded down the slippery wet bank to the rocks and climbed to where the car rested on its top. Marty stared for a moment at the single blazing headlight, then picked up a stone and smashed it into darkness.

The darkness was complete. Like a shroud around them, hiding them; no moon, no stars. And the rain had slowed to a hazy drizzle as Marty took the light from Hank and turned it on. The bright narrow beam reached out, sweeping, searching, stopping at a sagging front door. A woman in a fur coat had been driving. She wasn't driving now. She was just sitting there, half in and half out of the car, her spread legs flung high and propped against the car door, indecently exposed.

Real society stuff, Marty thought. Funny how embarrassed she'd be, ordinarily, if a guy like him saw anything. Now it didn't make any difference who saw her. No difference at all.

And tucking the flashlight under his arm he knelt and worked the rings from her finger and slipped a watch from her wrist, and as he reached

for a sparkling choker at her throat the light caught her full in the face and for long sickening seconds Marty wanted to get the hell away from there, far away, fast. He jerked the choker free and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Hey, Marty, swing the light over here!"

Hank was on the other side of the car, a little forward. The light hit him and dropped to the dark figure lying crumpled at his feet. Marty held the beam steady while Hank stooped and went through the man's pockets. The man moaned.

Hank looked up, "This guy's still alive."

"So?"

Hank shrugged and opened a tooled wallet fat with bills. "Jesus, lookit the loot!"

"Hurry up!" Marty was getting impatient. The rain had stopped and a car hissed by on the road above, its lights sweeping the blackness above the rail. It didn't stop.

Hank was stuffing money in his pockets along with a watch and a pair of gold cuff-links and a cigarette-lighter. He had tossed the empty wallet aside.

The man moaned again, weakly. But the flashlight beam had flicked away and darted into the back seat of the car. Hank was at Marty's shoulder, leaning forward, tense, eager. "What's back there?"

Marty shook his head. "Nothin'. Just a dog. Dead."

"Let's look in the trunk," Hank said.

Marty paused, uncertain. He looked up the steep bank toward their car. It was dark, quiet. The damp silence of the place calmed him. After all, he thought, these jerks can't use the stuff any more. They're dead. Or soon will be.

Hank had climbed up on the rear bumper and pulled down the trunk lid, exposing a jumble of boxes and suitcases. "Clothes," he muttered disgustedly, rummaging through the stuff. "Nothin' but clothes!"

Marty walked around to the side of the car and tried the glove compartment. Locked. He reached across the panel, yanked out the ignition keys. Jerks that would leave a loaded trunk unlocked probably locked the glove compartment up with nothing in it. He fitted a key to the lock and turned it.

"Hank! Come here!"

Hank came around the side of the car carrying an electric razor. "What'sa matter?"

"Look," Marty held out a .38 revolver, loaded. The light from his flash glittered on the blue-black metal.

They scrambled up the bank, Marty packing the flashlight and revolver with Hank at his heels lugging a box loaded with loot and grumbling all the way to the top. "I still think we oughta strip the car, man. At least get the radio an' spare tire."

"I told you," Marty tossed over his shoulder, "we got no time. We been hangin' around too long already."

Hank grunted. "Now who's hawk an' who's chicken?"

Marty swung around, the muzzle of the gun swinging with him, pointing straight at Hank's face, stopping him cold. Marty thumbed the hammer back. "Say that again!" His eyes had the bright hardness of glass.

Hank almost dropped the box. "Hey, cut it, man! I was kiddin'; honest, I was just kiddin'!"

Marty lowered the gun, shoved it inside his belt. His eyes cooled. "Well, stop kiddin', Hank," he said. "You'll live longer."

"Sure, Marty." There was a tenseness, a menace in the way he said it, but Marty passed it by.

They reached the top of the embankment and found the chick waiting beside the shattered guard rail. "Where you guys been? I wanna go home. I've been sick."

"You got a loose mouth," Marty said. "Get in the car."

She shook her head, trying to clear it. "Wait, what'd you do down there? What happened?"

Marty stepped up close and gripped her arm tight. "Get in the car!" It was clear he wouldn't repeat it. The chick climbed in the car.

"Now let's get outta here," Marty said.

He started around the car to get in on the driver's side when Hank's hand on his arm stopped him. Marty half turned and felt the sudden hot bite of the switchblade in his guts, and Hank's voice harsh and strained in the darkness, "That's for threatening me, Marty. Nobody threatens me with a gun, not even you."

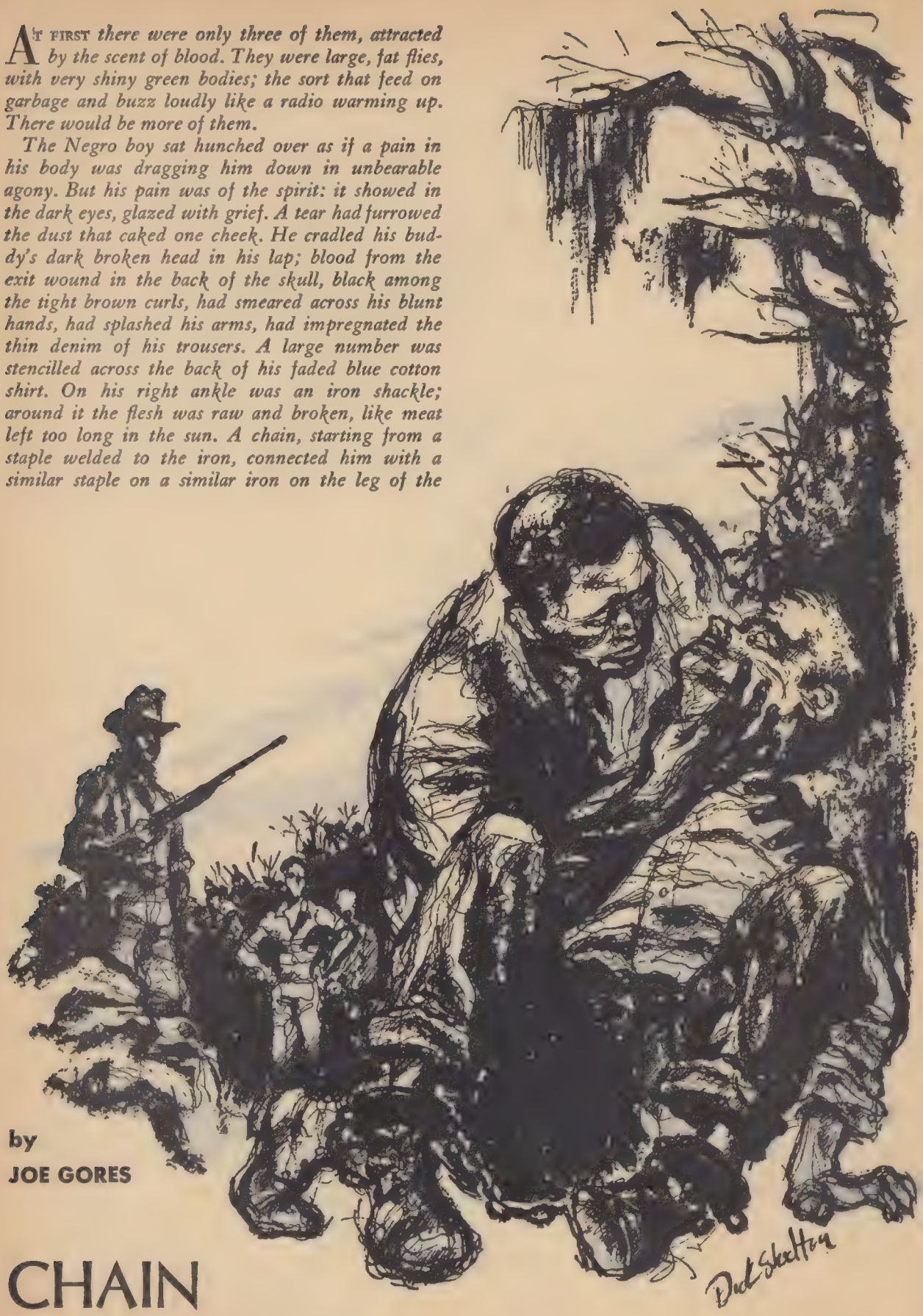
Marty was up against the wet metal of the car, fighting shock and clawing at the gun tucked in his belt. It came out big and cold and roaring in his hand and Hank staggered back and folded into the ground like an empty sack.

Marty dropped the gun and stood there, staring down at the handle of the switchknife protruding from his belly. He couldn't make up his mind whether to take it out or leave it in, and before he could decide what to do about it, he fell. He was down on his hands and knees in the mud and he could hear the chick screaming, a shrill skull-piercing scream that faded away in the darkness and was gone. And everything started going hot and cold and hazy as he leaned heavily against the shattered rail, his mind a jumble of thoughts—that it should all come to this—his craziest idea yet. But maybe this last one was too crazy, or maybe Hank was right about following through. Maybe they should have stuck to the original plan. They had the chick made; she was theirs for the taking. Maybe that should have been enough.

He smiled weakly in the blackness; and later on, the rain began to fall again, hard. But Marty couldn't feel the wetness on his cold dead face.

AT FIRST *there were only three of them, attracted by the scent of blood. They were large, fat flies, with very shiny green bodies; the sort that feed on garbage and buzz loudly like a radio warming up. There would be more of them.*

The Negro boy sat hunched over as if a pain in his body was dragging him down in unbearable agony. But his pain was of the spirit: it showed in the dark eyes, glazed with grief. A tear had furrowed the dust that caked one cheek. He cradled his buddy's dark broken head in his lap; blood from the exit wound in the back of the skull, black among the tight brown curls, had smeared across his blunt hands, had splashed his arms, had impregnated the thin denim of his trousers. A large number was stencilled across the back of his faded blue cotton shirt. On his right ankle was an iron shackle; around it the flesh was raw and broken, like meat left too long in the sun. A chain, starting from a staple welded to the iron, connected him with a similar staple on a similar iron on the leg of the



by
JOE GORES

CHAIN GANG

Some day, Captain, you're going to die. Some day I'm going to kill you.

corpse. As the Negro boy rocked back and forth the chain links ticked together with a faint, melodious sound.

"Why fo he have to shoot him?" he moaned. The four other men in the gang remained silent. He looked up with ravaged, unseeing eyes that accused everything still living. "Why did he have to shoot him in the head? All he did was to stop and wipe his face; he just raise his hand to wipe his face. Why fo he shoot my buddy, why?"

The medium-sized, heavy-bodied man known only as Captain Hent slowly returned his revolver to a stained and shiny holster worn low on his hip. A heavy leather belt encircled his waist, which was thick without being fat. His strong jaws looked as if they needed a shave, and he smelled of sweat, though not so much as the prisoners, not nearly so much.

"Leave him be." His voice was heavy, ugly. "Leave him be, but—" here a movement of the cold blue eyes included all of them— "Remember him. Remember he raised his hand to me."

Chained in pairs the men began to move. The Negro bent and buried his face in the taut neck of his buddy. In a whisper he said, against the strong dead throat: "That Cap'n is bound to die." Then he slid the body off his lap. Blood smeared down across the knees of his trousers, and the dead boy's left hand struck the dirt as softly as a girl's breath stirring a window curtain. The hand looked white and still against the dark earth.

They had dropped off a rattler five weeks before, when it slowed for the grade half a mile this side of town. Their heavy shoes struck the embankment running and sank into the soft grade fill, sending out rattling showers of wet pebbles. One of them, missing his footing in the dark, rolled over and over down the slope until the long grass beside the right of way stopped him. Sniffing the half-acrid scent of dirt newly wet down, he laughed.

"Hey, man, old brakeman never catch us now."

"I'd have whipped that bastard flat if you hadn't stopped me."

A moving shadow trudged back, slid down the embankment on its heels, lit a cigarette, and became a man. The cupped match flame revealed a young, hard face with deep-welled blue eyes and a square, cleft chin. His hair was brown and curled tightly against his skull by the rain.

The Negro, taller, rose and brushed off his brown cord trousers. Slanting rain popped on his leather jacket and slid off, glistening. A dirty plaid cap hid his kinky hair. His name was Larkie and he was light-colored for a Haitian Negro.

"I still got two bits and a dime," he said. "Come on, let's go into town and get us something to eat. You got any loot?"

"Just half a pack of butts. God, could I use a drink. I'm wet and cold clean through."

"No whiskey. Won't no one serve a white man and a colored man anyway."

"If we weren't broke—"

"We are, though."

"Okay. Soup it is."

They waded through the sodden whip-grass and smart weed that choked the ditch. A quail exploded ahead of them and squeaked away into the darkness. Beyond the tracks was a shallowly-rutted road of muddy sand: they turned toward the fitful yellow pocks that marked the town through the rain. Far ahead, the freight train dropped its pressure with a great sigh. Dim bushes to their left, blessed by the rain, smelled fresh and sweet.

The dirt road became a dirt side street over which two street lights bounced like buttons on a string. Through their dim glow the rain seemed to drift, yet it drummed the wooden walk like running feet and splattered brown geysers from the muddy puddles. A big man came from an all-night diner and stopped to pick his teeth in its light. Yellow highlights gleamed on his black slicker as he moved down to the corner.

Looking in the diner window, the boys saw that a counter, topped with red linoleum, ran the length; its wooden edging had been chipped and carved by generations of pocket knives. Most of the stools had rips in their imitation leather seats. The homely waitress was alone, washing fountain glasses in grey, soapy water.

"What you think, Dale?"

"She's got a kind face. And I got to get something in my gut."

"Okay, Dale. In we go."

They stopped just inside the door to drip water on the floor. The girl looked at them uncertainly, finally came down the counter drying her hands on the towel wrapped around her middle. Her hair was the color and texture of straw, and nearly as straight. She wore no makeup.

"Yes?"

"Look, miss," said Larkie. His hands moved like instruments measuring her credulity. "We got us thirty-five cents. It's cold and wet out, and we just passing through. What that money buy us?"

She bit her lip, looking from one to the other, finally said:

"Well—I'll let you have two bowls of soup and two coffees, if you promise to eat fast. It should be forty cents but I'm on alone tonight. I'm not supposed to serve—" she stopped abruptly, blushing.

Perched on the end stools they guzzled hot soup and drank steaming coffee as fast as their mouths could stand it, and ate the whole bowl of crackers she brought.

"Any work around here?" asked Dale. Under the light he was too big-boned for his size; though his hands were large and powerful his wrists made them seem small.

The girl shook her head. She looked around the

empty diner, then leaned across the counter. Her hair smelled of dime-store perfume.

"No work in the state, I don't think. Listen, where are you fellows from?"

"Up no'th," said Larkie.

She nodded. "You'd—they're sort of funny about —Negroes and whites around here. You'd do better to either split up or else go back up north again. You don't know how it is in this state."

"We're learning," said Dale. "Me and Larkie have—"

"Much obliged for the food, ma'am," said Larkie. "Come on, white boy, let's blow."

The big man in the black slicker was standing on the board walk, looking at the display of women's hats in a small store next to the diner. He looked like the sort of man who would find women's hats very uninteresting. Without seeming to, he blocked their way.

"Just a minute, 'bos."

Larkie said: "Oh-oh." Dale skipped sideways like a monkey, his hand whipping toward his trouser pocket. Moving with amazing speed for his size, the Negro shot out a long arm and locked the white boy's wrist with strong fingers.

"Easy on, Dale," he said.

The big man hadn't moved except to put his right hand under the shiny slicker. His straight brown hair, touched with grey at the temples, was combed severely back from his high forehead, and he wore a large moustache.

"You got a head, black boy," he said. "Just passing through?"

"You the Law?"

"That's me."

"Just passing through."

The big man shook his head slowly. A drop of rain water fell from the tip of his nose.

"Looks like maybe you were waiting around to do a little business at the diner here, after a while. The brakeman off the train told me about you two 'bos. Said to keep an eye on *you,* white boy." He extended a long finger.

Dale stepped back, blinking his eyes against the water running down from his tight curls. His face was deeply tanned and he wore a heavy blue Navy watch sweater that smelled wetly of wool.

"We ain't done anything in your town, mister. We ain't been near the railroad yards." His voice was low and sullen.

"Not the yards, that I believe," said the Sheriff. "Riding the rattlers, bumming meals in white restaurants where Negroes ain't allowed. . . . Know what that means, 'bos? Vag, that's what it means. Lots of road going through here, and the state's poor. Needs cheap labor." He took Larkie's arm in one big paw. "Let's take a walk."

They started down the main street of town. "Walk in front of us, 'bo," he said to Dale. "And keep your hand out of that pocket."

Larkie pulled his cap down against the rain and said politely:

"Nice little town you got here, Sheriff."

"It grows on you, 'bo. It grows on you."

There had been no rain since the night of their arrest. The ground was hard and dry; the men had to stamp on their shovels to make them bite at the earth, and reddish dust drifted from each shovelful of clods that went into the wheelbarrows. The backs of their necks were red and sore from the sun, their horny palms cracked from the sweat-slick shovel handles. Two pairs of men shovelled while the other two men, unchained, wheeled the barrows.

"Cap'n." Larkie's shovel did not pause in its rhythm.

"What is it, black boy?"

Captain Hent stood in the dry grass under a drooping, scrubby willow, thick arms crossed on his chest, hips slung forward in a comfortable slouch. His shirt was black with sweat. By his right foot was a water jug, its sides beaded with moisture.

"How about a drink of the water?"

"You know better than that, black boy. Ten minutes yet." His voice was heavy, like the baying of an old hound that has grown mean.

The only sounds were the grunts of the men, the rattle of earth in the barrows. Each time they bent to shovel, whole beads of hot sweat rained from their foreheads onto their hands and wrists. A heat-haze enveloped the sun.

"Cap'n."

"What, black boy?"

"How about giving me my time, Cap'n? I figure on quitting."

Whites and Negroes stopped shovelling, watched, listened. One of them snickered. The Captain's face reddened and he stepped closer to Larkie, unfolded his arms.

"You making fun of me, boy?" He asked softly.

Larkie's eyes widened with surprise. They became almost wide enough to be too wide for real surprise.

"No, Cap'n, I sure ain't. We out here expiating, sure ain't gonna draw no time."

"Aw, shut up, for God's sake," snarled Dale suddenly, straightening up and holding a hand to the small of his back. "Why argue with that . . . *Captain?* All he's got's a gun makes him feel like God Almighty."

"Cap'n just doing his duty, Dale." Larkie bent over his shovel again.

Captain Hent brought his face inches from Dale's. They stared at each other with eyes bloodshot from the heat. The Captain's fists were dumb clubs; Dale's shovel came up slowly across his body like a staff. It was some time before the Captain relaxed. He said intensely:

"All I need's a gun, 'bo. Maybe tonight at the compound we'll see how tough you are. Tonight on your own time."

As Dale attacked the red earth, he muttered: "If you're there—*Captain.*"

Captain Hent watched him shovel for some time, his pale killer's eyes thoughtful. He seemed to derive a physical pleasure from the heavy straining muscles etched sharply beneath the thin blue shirt.

For noon they ate bread and sat under the trees for half an hour. Larkie leaned back and shut his eyes wearily: men had been booked for vagrancy and had spent years in the chain gangs, forgotten by the courts. He wondered if the judge who had sentenced them to *six months hard* would forget. There had been egg on his tie and he hadn't shaved before coming to court. Rimless glasses had made his eyes benevolent, but he had allowed them no word of defense. Was it such a sin to be out of work? Did the good Lord make a man to wear a shackle around his ankle until the worms got into the raw flesh underneath and maimed him for life?

Beside him Dale said:

"I can't take no more of this, Larkie."

"Got to take it, Dale—ain't nothing else to do."

"We could get him down, take his gun away."

"Chained together? Man, you crazy."

"We could do it, I tell you. What if he has me whipped or something tonight?"

Larkie opened his eyes and turned to look at Dale. Dale stared straight ahead, upturned nose red and peeling, stubbled jaw thrust out with the old obstinacy Larkie had grown to know so well.

"You hear me now, man. We got us plenty of country to cover once we's out of *this* bind. Ain't no six months going to last forever."

"You think of something, Larkie: you think of something good, 'cause I can't stand it no more. I remember when I was a kid we lived in a big white house with a white fence around it and a red pump out in back higher than I was. I'd stick my head under there, hot days, and my brother would pump cold water on me." When he finally turned to Larkie his blue eyes burned. "I came from a good family, Larkie—I remember things like that, and I know I can't take this no more."

"Okay, Dale. I'll think of something. You promise me you won't do nothing till I say."

Captain Hent blew a little whistle that ended the noon break. As they got painfully to their feet, Dale said, "Okay—promise."

That afternoon Captain Hent shot him dead.

The Captain put one .44 slug in his head just under his right eye, firing from a crouch with body turned and gun arm extended in the approved Police Manual method. The gun was swept from its holster with a fluid movement that denoted long hours of practice before a mirror. His eyes became very hot and excited, as if he were making love to a woman; his face bore an elated and transported expression. The back of Dale's head split outward like a melon; he dropped his shovel and fell face forward across it. His nose broke against the pink earth.

"Good Christ in Heaven!" cried Larkie. He fell to his knees beside the corpse, heavily, breathing like a man who has just been kicked in the groin.

Captain Hent looked around at the expressionless, embittered faces, at the eyes that had not seen, the lips that would not speak.

"He was going to hit me with that shovel," he stated. "You all saw that. When the Warden comes around to find out what happened, you'll tell how he raised that shovel. He's been laying for me for a week."

After a long time, Anderson, who was up for attempted rape, said:

"We'll all say that, Captain. But we'll all know he was just wiping his face."

In order that the Warden could evaluate the manner of death, the corpse was left where it had fallen, and the men were returned to work. Flies were busy before evening and buzzards had clustered the trees darkly in silent speculation.

At night they were fastened to their beds like beasts in a kennel. A long chain, threaded through the staples of their leg irons, was passed down each row of cots. There was to be no talking after the lights were cut, but that night the electric word roved among the bleak lines of beds like an unleashed voltage of hate. Final sentence is not always pronounced by a judge: sometimes it is spoken soundlessly in the human heart. There are many ways of carrying out an execution.

The next day was Friday. Captain Hent's gang was a man short, but Larkie, the big Negro, was able to handle the barrow work alone. The Captain was in high spirits, free from the petty manifestations of frustration: when one of the men swung his shovel carelessly and sliced a long sliver of flesh from his partner's leg, the Captain did not even curse. He merely came over to unchain the fallen man before he bled to death.

As the Captain bent over, fumbling for his keys, shovel-strengthened fingers suddenly closed over his hand, pinioning it in his pocket. His left arm was jerked so the scatter gun fell, unfired, to the ground. The injured man's legs flailed and the Captain sprawled on his belly in the dust. When he opened his mouth to shout, a torn shirt, foul with brine, was stuffed between his teeth. Sharp clods scarred his back; his clothes were plucked away like feathers from a chicken. Despite the warm sun a chill ran through him when his trousers were yanked down, and his naked white flanks exposed.

By twisting his head the Captain was able to see Larkie set aside his barrow and bring out a switchblade knife. The Captain, belatedly, remembered many things: after the kill, the men had been too silent; Larkie had wept over Dale too long. He remembered that Larkie was supposed to be from

Haiti, and that Haitian Negroes are often very clever with knives.

Captain Hent was given no reason to doubt his memory, though he lived much longer than he cared to live. Fifty yards down the road, the next guard did not hear a sound or notice the stained earth being hurriedly wheeled by to serve as fill for the highway; the river half a mile away was deep and brown, its current swift enough to carry a new corpse a hundred miles before it surfaced. On the banks, bloodhounds lost Larkie's scent. It was assumed that he had drowned.

With so many men bumming on the trains that passed beyond the river, it was easy for a big light-colored Negro with cunning, careful eyes and fresh shackle scars to pass unnoticed. Three days later he was out of the state. In his heart he bore the serene realization that a death had paid for a death.

No Rubber

In Des Moines, Iowa, merchants excitedly called the bank after they received checks signed "A. Swindler." But the checks, signed by the treasurer of Davco, a Junior Achievement firm, were good. The treasurer, Ann Swindler, admitted she could not resist the temptation to pull the gag.

Dog Decoy

Baltimore, Md., police used a plainclothes dog in making a raid on a pet hospital suspected of being the front for a bookmaking operation. Lt. Hyman Goldstein used one of the department's K-9 Corps dogs to get into the hospital without arousing suspicion. Other officers closed in and arrested Martin D. Loy, 71, the veterinarian. Betting slips totaling over $1,000 were found.

Weather Control

From now on snow will be arrested if it dares to fall within the city limits of Brawley, Calif. The city council became concerned last winter when snow fell in Los Angeles. To avoid the need of purchasing a snowplow the councilmen passed a resolution forbidding the fall of snow.

Double Trouble

It was a rugged day recently for Chester Hill, of Cambridge, Mass. While he was waiting in line to pay his income tax, a pickpocket stole his billfold containing $12.

Men at Work

In Ardmore, Okla., a painter left his truck in front of a building. He left a note on the windshield saying, "Painter working on the inside." When he returned he found another note attached to a parking ticket. It said: "Cop working on the outside."

Perfect Plea

An 18-year-old boy was being arraigned in Huntington, W. Va., city court on a charge of breaking and entering. "How do you plead?" the judge asked. "I plead for probation," the youth replied.

Good Samaritan

Raquel Cordova, a Denver, Colo., grocer, is a generous man. Cordova captured Alfonso Vigil attempting to break into his grocery store. Later he provided food for Vigil's wife and nine children while Vigil was in jail.

Out of Business

by

C. B. GILFORD

The girl was no good, and she wouldn't leave town. So the powerful people in town decided to take a hand . . .

THEY HAD a meeting, that hot August evening, about how to get rid of a certain woman. They didn't have murder in mind, or anything like it. Because they were respectable people, probably the most respectable people in the whole respectable town.

And Fern "Smith," they were fairly certain, wasn't respectable. That's right, "Smith," not Smith, because they figured it wasn't her real name. Could have been her real name, of course, but they were in no mood to give her the benefit of the doubt on anything.

Just to look at her sometimes, maybe when she'd be sitting on a counter stool in Foster's Drug Store, eating an ice cream soda, you wouldn't have thought she'd be any harm to anybody. A woman with a taste for ice cream sodas ought to be innocent enough, wouldn't you think? She was about thirty or so probably, kind of ordinary looking. Not homely by a long shot, but then not beautiful either. A

little on the dark side, kind of olive skin, and black hair, and brown eyes as gentle as a deer's. Figure was okay, you might have noticed, but you'd decide also that you'd seen a lot better.

So she fooled them. She drifted into Shefton driving a three-year-old Ford, and she told people she was a widow with a little money who'd like a nice quiet town like Shefton to live in. If she could find the right place, she'd send for her son who was at boarding school, and she'd settle down among us. Nobody ever did see the son, of course. Maybe there was one, and maybe there wasn't.

But it sounded good. Mrs. Karnes, who was the richest woman in town and owned a dozen pieces of property, had a little cottage she'd rent to her. Mrs. Karnes thought she was being pretty shrewd about the whole thing. She made Fern sign a year's lease, ironclad. You couldn't have broken that lease with anything less than the mutual consent of the parties . . . or maybe the death of one of them. That lease turned out to be a problem then, you see.

Anyway, Fern settled down in Shefton. She put frilly little white curtains in the windows of her little house, and she planted flowers all around the yard. She looked to all the world like a solid citizen.

The change—the enlightening, you might say—came gradually. It was actually funny how gradually it did come. Maybe the people in Shefton were naive. Or maybe the few smart ones who caught on quick just weren't anxious to tell the dumb ones about it.

You remember about the ice cream sodas at Foster's Drug Store? Well, Foster's was right in the middle of town, about five blocks from where Fern lived. It was along about May probably, getting a bit hot in the daytime, and staying muggy and sticky through the evenings. Fern liked the ice cream sodas to cool off, I guess, after the heat of the day. So she'd go down to Foster's, walking the five blocks, just after dinner time, along about seven o'clock.

And you know how it is sometimes in little towns. People will sit outdoors in the evenings, on the porches or in their front yards maybe. Or at least the men will sit outside while their wives do the dishes. Down in the business district around Foster's whole rows of men, all ages, will be standing around. Young men trying to figure out something to do for the evening, devilment preferably, and the oldtimers remembering and wishing they weren't so old. Yes, sir, a fair portion of the male population of Shefton would be lined up every night along Fern's route from her house to the drug store and back again.

Which was why she walked it, I guess.

But it was the way she walked it that made the difference. She had a way. If you looked close, you didn't have to look twice. Women swing their hips a little when they walk. They have to. They're built that way. But Fern "Smith" had a sort of special swing, not exaggerated, but calculated, deliberate, even practiced maybe, and tremendously effective. That swing was the tip-off.

There you have the situation. It's been a hot, difficult day, and you're frazzled. It's still warm, too warm to really relax. So you're restless, fidgety. Maybe once in a while there's a breath of cool breeze, and it tingles against your warm, moist body. The sun's just going down. It's a world half of light, half of dark, half known and half mysterious. There's a busy conversation of insects in the air, and the smell of green, bursting-out things. Everything is alive and ripening, and you have to be near dead not to feel in tune with it, not to feel the lure of it. Then along comes this woman. She's Eve . . . Bathsheba . . . Lady Godiva . . . Marilyn Monroe . . . in the warm, humid, half-light you imagine, you invent. There's only one thing really certain . . . The Invitation.

So maybe you drift along too. You need a pack of cigarettes at the drug store. She's alone there at the counter, sipping her ice cream soda. You're in the harsh, artificial light now. But it's already too late to make any difference. You've already imagined and invented. You catch her eye, in the mirror over the soda fountain maybe. Those are interesting eyes she has, let me tell you, once you decide to really look at them. You can't look away. It's she who breaks it off, who glances down demurely at her ice cream soda, and never seems to look up again. You wait for her to look up. But she doesn't. She doesn't have to.

Everybody in a little town knows where everybody else lives.

That's how she started it. That's how she kept on doing it. It wasn't particularly original, except maybe for our town. It was simple. And it worked, because no matter what the size of the town, human beings don't differ much. May became June, and then July. It got hotter and stickier, and the population got more restless with the worsening weather. In August there was a heat wave. The pillars of society in Shefton were goaded into action.

They had this meeting I mentioned. Four people with murder in their hearts even though it wasn't on their minds. At Mrs. Karnes' the meeting was, in the parlor of her fine, stately old house with all its ugly Victorian furniture. So of course Mrs. Karnes was there. And there was Judge Moffett, and Sam Wescott the chief-of-police, and Mrs. Alvina Spence.

"I still don't see why I can't break her lease," Mrs. Karnes said. She was frail and deceptively delicate looking, with her white hair and gaunt face and heavily veined hands. "Why can't I break her lease?"

"I wrote that lease myself," Judge Moffett answered. The Judge was the gray-haired, fiftyish picture of dignity and success. "I wrote it so that you could collect a year's rent from that woman even if she decided to leave in a week. I'm afraid we're

caught, as you might say, in our own trap. It'll have to be up to Sam."

Sam's sweaty fat face frowned unhappily. "What can I do?" he challenged them. "I tried to bluff. I tried to scare her. But the woman knows her rights. We've got nothing on her."

"Nothing!" Alvina Spence had no patience with legal technicalities when they contradicted the plain facts. "Haven't dozens of men in this town visited her house? You could catch her redhanded any night of the week!"

"No, no, we can't do that." It was the Judge who intervened.

"Why not?" Alvina wanted to know, though she'd been told often enough.

"For the very good reason, Alvina, that we don't know who we'd find there. Mrs. Karnes' nephew perhaps. Or my son."

Alvina, chesty, redoubtable-looking matron though she was, could only wring her hands then and complain piteously, "We've got to do something."

"We've got to do something, that's certain," the Judge agreed. "I'm afraid that woman's more dangerous even than we thought."

"What do you mean?" they asked him fearfully.

"She's more than just the ordinary . . . the ordinary tramp," he said. "We've never really appreciated her, I realize now. At first we were simply outraged that she'd dare to ply her trade in our community. That was our first reaction, if you'll remember. It was our civic duty to get rid of her. But then it got to a personal basis. Mrs. Karnes' nephew, my son, Sam's brother-in-law, others. We had to protect our own. But even then, I must confess, I didn't think the situation was so perilous. If you ladies will pardon my saying it, a man can have escapades of this sort, and he can recover from them. His reputation isn't permanently damaged. People will forget and forgive. I thought we could get rid of the woman eventually and we could all settle back to normalcy. But it's not that simple. I found that out from my son today. He's in love with her."

The stunned silence lasted for almost a minute, and then it was Alvina who said in a hoarse, frightened whisper, "But your Larry's engaged to my Alice."

"Precisely, Alvina," the Judge answered portentously. "Precisely. Now we begin to see the real extent of the danger. What the woman's fascination is, I don't know. But she is quite capable of dragging my son . . . or any one of several of the men she's involved with . . . down to permanent ruin and degradation."

The four of them sat there then and stared at one another.

"We've got to do something," Alvina said after a while.

"I know of only one approach," Judge Moffett said. "We'll have to bribe her."

But Mrs. Karnes shook her frail white head. "I've tried that too," she told him. "And failed."

They might have given up at that point. They might have conceded the contest to Fern "Smith." Because they were baffled and helpless. But it didn't happen that way. It didn't happen because another actor, the final addition to the cast of this little drama, appeared on the scene.

Willy Dolfin stuck his head in the door and drawled, "Miz Karnes, I fixed them shelves in the basement and I cleaned up all the mess I made, so can I go now?"

Willy Dolfin needs an explanation, I guess. Though you can't really explain Willy. You can describe him sort of. But nobody that I ever heard of could really explain why there are such human beings as Willy in our world.

Willy was maybe what the doctors would call a moron. Or maybe he fell into some other technical category. It doesn't matter. You get the idea. Willy was a man, but he had the mind of a child. Like a child, he had to let somebody else do his thinking for him.

He'd grown up in Shefton, so everybody had gotten used to him. He'd had parents, but they'd died, and within the town limits, Willy became a sort of migrant. He had no home. He'd slept in the storeroom of the grocery store, Mrs. Karnes' basement, the police station. He had a big strong body, and he could work. So people gave him work to do when they had the right kind, with lots of sweat and no thinking. Because Willy could think only simple, easy thoughts. Innocent thoughts. Willy had the strength of two average men, but at eighteen, he'd never harmed anyone in his life.

So there he was now, his bulk filling that doorway in Mrs. Karnes' house, his flat, almost vacant face wreathed in a childlike, apologetic grin. And he was saying again, "I finished my work, Miz Karnes. Can I go now?"

They stared at him. And then they looked around at one another. It was hard to tell which one of them got the idea first, or whether they all got the same idea at the same time. But eventually at least they all got it, in that interim of silence, without anybody saying a word to anybody else.

It was to Willy they talked finally, with Judge Moffett as their first spokesman. "How are you this evening, Willy?" he asked pleasantly. There was no doubt or uncertainty in his tone. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"Okay, Judge, okay." Willy grinned again.

"So you've finished your work, eh?" The Judge leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs in his suspenders, and grinned too. "What are you going to do now?"

Willy hesitated, scratched his uncombed, corn silk hair. "Guess I'll go down to the drug store, have a soda," he said finally.

That answer electrified the room. Anybody but Willy would have been suspicious of the unconcealed excitement in all those faces.

"Ain't he the sly one though? the Judge said. "You're too late for the drug store, Willy. She's gone home by now."

Willy's face displayed his puzzlement. "Who's she?"

"Oh come on now, Willy." The Judge rose and crossed the room to the doorway. Standing beside Willy, he was almost a head shorter, even though he was an average-sized man. He nudged Willy playfully in the ribs. "You know who we're talking about, Willy. Mrs. 'Smith.' "

"Mrs. Smith?" He knew who she was, but his arrested brain failed to make the connection.

"Sure. Fern. Your sweetheart."

Willy's face was blank. They could only guess what dim thought might be stirring behind it. They could only hope.

"Maybe Willy doesn't know, Judge." Mrs. Karnes spoke, her fragile voice sugarly, like a schoolgirl's.

Willy blinked at Mrs. Karnes.

Alvina Spence chimed in. "Do you mean to say you don't really know, Willy? That woman's crazy about you."

It was doubtful that Willy realized the implications. There were lots of things about the ways of the world that Willy had never seemed to understand or appreciate. But these people could teach him. Yes, they could.

"I've heard her mention it more than once," the Judge said. "Why doesn't Willy ever come to see me? I sure wish he would."

Willy smiled. He was flattered, pleased. Not many people had ever been interested in him. "Should I go see her?" he wondered.

"Sure, Willy," the Judge told him.

He hesitated one moment longer. But they were all nodding and smiling at him, in such obvious approval. Finally he grinned back at them. "I'll go see her." he said.

They waited till they heard Willy go out the front door and then by a sort of tacit strategy, the Judge and Sam Wescott put their hats on and followed him.

Willy was tall and muscularly lean, and he had a long stride. Sam Wescott was fat and the Judge almost pudgy, so they had a sweaty time keeping up with him. They had to trot part of the way, and they were noisy and clumsy in their pursuit. But apparently Willy never noticed. He walked right on.

There was a single light showing in Fern's parlor window. The rest of the house was dark. These circumstances meant nothing particularly to Willy. He went straight up the front path, got lost in the deeper shadows of the porch. But the pounding of his big knuckles on the door, honest, unsubtle, reverberated through the hot night.

No answer came at first. That didn't seem to disturb Willy. The parlor light proved she was home. And she wanted to see him. He kept right on pounding, louder, more insistent. And finally—because she almost had to—Fern Smith came to the door. The Judge and Sam, crouching in the hedge, saw her figure outlined against the interior light. She was wearing a dressing gown of some sort.

"Well, what is it?" they heard her say.

"I came to see you," Willy said.

There was a silence while the woman must have pondered. She had seen Willy around the town. She must have been vaguely aware of what kind of creature he was. But she scarcely could have marked him as a potential customer. Yet now there was his rather conveniently worded greeting, wide open to misinterpretation.

"I'm busy," she said finally.

Willy's simple brain had fastened on its objective, and he wasn't that easily shaken off. "Don't you want to see me?" he persisted.

"Of course not," she told him.

"Yes, you do . . ."

"Go away," she answered. There was an emotion in her voice. Fear. Just the hint of it. If you didn't know Willy, if you hadn't known him for years, if you hadn't known from long experience how harmless he was, he could scare you. He was so big. "Go away," she repeated, a little louder, a little shriller. And she backed up and slammed the door in Willy's face.

The two watchers stayed hidden in the hedge. After a minute or so, Willy must have decided that the woman's door wasn't going to open again. He clumped down off the porch. His step was heavy, dejected. He came down the path and turned into the sidewalk, his shoulders hunched, his pace a lot slower than before.

He was easier to follow now. The Judge and Sam tailed him for several blocks. Finally he stopped, sat down on a curbing under a street light. They walked up to him as if they'd just happened to be passing by.

"Hello, Willy," the Judge said cheerfully.

Willy didn't answer.

"What's the matter with you?" Sam Wescott wanted to know. "You look like you've lost your last friend."

Willy finally turned his face up to them. There was pain in his face, an animal pain that questions and wonders why the pain has to be. "You said she wanted to see me," he said. "But she didn't. She wouldn't let me in."

The Judge and Sam exchanged quick glances, and the Judge said, "Willy, you just don't understand women. They're all like that. They like to pretend."

Willy was attentive.

"You never had a girl, did you, Willy?" the Judge asked.

Willy blinked, shook his head.

"Did you ever want a girl, Willy?"

Willy's eyes clouded. He frowned. What thoughts whirled undigested in his malformed brain? What desires did his big, man's body communicate to that brain? Neither the Judge nor Sam Wescott could have known. They were meddling with something they didn't comprehend.

"You understand about girls and women, don't you, Willy?" the Judge went on.

Willy nodded. But he didn't.

"Men and women are two different kinds of people, Willy. And the strangest thing about this world is that these two kinds of people are so interested in each other. They need each other. They want each other. But sometimes—especially the women—they pretend they don't. They pretend they want to be alone. But that's silly. And it isn't right. You don't want to be alone, now do you, Willy? Of course you don't. And it's natural that you want to be with some girl. I'm right about that, ain't I, Willy?"

The creature on the curb seemed to be thinking, trying to understand a mystery that wise men had never understood. Was the mystery attractive to him?

"Now you've got to remember this, Willy. A woman will pretend. She'll pretend she doesn't like you, doesn't want to see you. But she doesn't mean it. She wants you just as much as you want her. So you go right ahead. Just be careful. Just be patient. Keep trying, and don't take no for an answer. You like Fern, don't you, Willy?"

Was a fire lighted in the creature's body? In his brain? The Judge didn't know. He couldn't have known. Human beings are unpredictable. Children the most unpredictable of all. What about a grown man with a child's brain?

"You go ahead and be nice to Fern, Willy. Go to see her every day. Doesn't matter if she pretends she doesn't want to see you. Just keep on trying."

Willy was sitting in that lighted place and staring out into the surrounding darkness. He had a lot to think about now. It was getting late. The Judge took out his gold watch and noted the time.

"I got to be getting home, Sam," he said. "My wife's expecting me."

"And my wife's waiting for me too," Sam Wescott said.

So they walked on and left Willy there all alone.

Well, the rest of it kind of followed from there. Events always happen in a series. For every effect there's a cause.

What was probably the next thing happened the following evening. Along about dusk, seven o'clock or so. The ritual time in Shefton. The time for Fern Smith's walk to the drug store. The time of invitation.

Willy Dolfin was in front of the barber shop. He'd had his hair cut. Willy had seldom indulged in such vanities. People had always had to tell him, "Willy, go get your hair cut." Maybe they'd even given him the money to get it done. But this time, for the first time in his life, it had been his own idea. And now with the shop closed, he loitered in front of it. And he'd seldom loitered on the streets. With nothing better to do, people had often teased him. He'd been more aware of their teasing than those people had ever realized. But tonight he took the chance.

She came down Main Street at precisely her usual time.

It was a strange ritual. Because when she came there was a feeling suddenly in the air. Tonight Willy Dolfin was a part of it. He too felt it. A kind of reverence for the elemental forces of life. Reverence, that's the only proper word.

That was why, though all those men knew what Fern "Smith" was and why she always walked this way—that was why they acted so gentlemanly. It was that reverence they felt. They could have shouted dirty words at her, or at least passed them back and forth among one another. But they never did. They always watched her passage silently. Oh sure, they watched. And what they thought in their minds was their own business. But they never got out of hand.

And this night Willy Dolfin was part of them. This night Willy Dolfin breathed that air so heavy with expectancy and desire. This night Willy Dolfin waited for Fern Smith to come and eat an ice cream soda at Foster's Drug Store.

She was wearing a frilly dress, white with red flowers in it. The skirt was pleated. It followed her movements as she walked, played a visual symphony to the tune of her swinging hips. She smiled quietly now and then at some she passed. Acquaintances.

But she stopped smiling when she came to Willy. And she stopped. The symphony stopped. Fern Smith stared at Willy Dolfin.

People who described it later said she stared at him in terror. The terror had no real reason for being. Willy was just standing there admiring her as everybody else was. He didn't move. He didn't say anything. But she stopped and stared at him, and her face grew pale. Her lips, now dreadfully scarlet against the whiteness of her face, opened as if to scream. She didn't scream though. Her terror was wordless. She just stood there for almost a minute gazing at Willy. Then she turned. Turned and ran as if she'd seen the face of doom itself.

People remembered the incident. They remembered it as the night a woman in a light-colored dress ran down their shadowy streets till she got back to the shelter of her own little house, where she slammed and locked the door behind her. Mr. Foster remembered it as the night Fern Smith didn't eat an ice cream soda at his counter.

And it was the very next morning, as Sam Wes-

cott well knew, that Fern Smith, wearing a dark, inconspicuous dress, her eyes red from lack of sleep, cornered him in his private office.

"I want protection," she began, her voice harsh and hoarse.

"Protection from what?" Sam asked her.

"A man. They say his name is Willy. The big boy who's not right in his head . . ."

Sam Wescott leaned back in his swivel chair and laughed. "Willy Dolfin? There's nothing wrong with Willy's head except that it's almost empty. But anyway, what's he done?"

"He's after me . . ."

"What's he done exactly?"

"Night before last he knocked at my door and said he wanted to come in . . ."

Sam laughed again. His laughter boomed out like a bell. There was the sound of iron in it. "Mrs. 'Smith,'" he said, "what's wrong with that? Aren't you used to men coming to your door?"

"I'm afraid of Willy Dolfin," she said quickly.

Sam shrugged his shoulders, gestured with his fat palms upward. "I don't see what I can do about your imagination," he said. "All us natives know better. We know Willy's harmless as a baby." He grinned.

But there was iron in the woman too. And she was smart. She caught on right away. "I understand," she said. "You're using that poor moron to try to scare me. You probably gave him the idea yourself. You're trying to scare me out of town."

Sam went right on grinning.

Fern Smith crossed to Sam's desk and leaned across it, and looked Sam right in the eye. "I'm staying," she said.

Sam Wescott watched her swing defiantly out of his office. An unusual woman, he thought. I almost wish it wasn't my sworn duty to be so damned unfriendly to her. Attractive. And smart besides. But if she's so smart, why is she so deathly afraid of Willy Dolfin?

But afraid or not, she stayed. Stayed right to the bitter end.

Which brings us to the last meeting of the Citizen's Committee for the Eradication of Unsavory Women. The last meeting where Fern "Smith" was on the agenda anyway.

It was a full-scale meeting. Mrs. Karnes was there. So was Alvina Spence. And Judge Moffett. They spent the time till Sam's arrival congratulating themselves on their Willy Dolfin strategy.

"I told him yesterday," Mrs. Karnes said, "that maybe he ought to take her some flowers. I gave him some of my best roses. He headed right for her house with 'em."

"Did he get in?" Alvina asked gleefully.

"I don't imagine so. Willy brought the roses back."

"What did he say?"

"He wouldn't say a thing."

"She's scared of him all right."

"I think she must have her doors and windows nailed shut. And the shades have been kept pulled down all week."

"I think we can conclude this at least," the Judge intoned pontifically. "We may not have driven her out of town, but we've certainly put her out of business."

And they went on like that for half an hour.

Till Sam Wescott arrived. Sam was late. He was sweating. His fat face was pale and greasy with sweat. He had news for them.

"The woman's dead," he said. "Willy killed her. Strangled her and beat her head against the floor. He came to my office and told me about it. He was all covered with blood."

. . . Well, that was the end of the meeting. But not the end of the story. Because there had to be a trial.

Willy Dolfin was adjudged sane. Not too bright, but sane. He knew the difference between right and wrong, that is. And due to the circumstances of the case, they had to try him for first-degree murder.

Sam Wescott was Willy's jailer. As chance would have it, Alvina Spence's name came up for jury duty. She couldn't refuse to serve, because if she did she might have had to reveal her part in the affair. And Judge Moffett was on the bench. Only Mrs. Karnes stayed clear. She might have been a spectator, but people said she had a stroke of some kind.

They found Willy guilty because they had to. He was guilty. Alvina Spence sat rigid and white in the jurybox while the foreman read the verdict.

Judge Moffett delayed the sentencing for three days, as long as he decently could. Some said he was drunk for those three days. Certainly he acted drunk, or at least very strange, when he eventually sat there behind the high bench and told Willy Dolfin he had to hang.

But the story isn't over yet . . . not quite.

There are four unpunished murderers in Shefton. There's Mrs. Karnes. She's still in bed, they say. She's had a lot of time to think. There's Alvina. She's a compulsive church-goer now, always talking about how she has to rid the town of sin. People are wondering about her. There's Sam Wescott. He isn't chief-of-police any more. He resigned. He's not an old man, but he sits on his front porch all the time just like an old man. He sits and rocks. Maybe he thinks. And then there's the Judge. They say he and his son had a terrible argument. The son ran away somewhere, and now the Judge broods a lot about that. Yes sir, four unpunished murderers.

Willy Dolfin hangs tomorrow morning. So the story, as I said, isn't quite over yet.

There's no telling what will happen tonight.

When CHICKIE, my girl, wrote the note and passed it under the desk to the fellow in front of her, I was just looking around the room, bored as hell, so I saw her do it. I watched the note go down one row of seats and up the next, wishing it would hurry up and get to me. When it did, I read it fast, but I didn't pass it on right away. For a time there, I even thought of tearing it up.

Chickie's pretty face went dead white as Miss Nelson marched across the classroom and snatched the note from a Slasher who sat near the front of the class.

As she read it, Miss Nelson's narrow face turned bright red and her bony body stiffened. No question about her being a substitute. Regular teachers at Maderro High don't let four letter words bother them—they're too used to seeing 'em scrawled all over the place.

Every eye turned to Sandra Papaldo. I guess we were all wondering the same thing: what she'd do when she found out her name was signed to the note, and that, in dirty words, it invited Hunchy, the ugliest guy in class to come to bed with her.

Miss Nelson walked straight to Sandra's desk.

duel in the pit

Nothing could stop Sandra and Chickie from fighting it out. None of the gang figured they'd go as far as they did.

by RICK SARGENT

The room got quiet as hell because we all must have had the same feeling that this was the start of big trouble.

"Stand up!" Miss Nelson commanded, her high voice going so high it became a shriek.

Sandra did what she was told—slow and looking like she didn't know what this was all about. She's almost as tall as Miss Nelson and, man, that chick's sure got a wild body. Her blue skirt and red blouse really hugged the curves. Alongside her, Miss Nelson didn't even hardly look like a woman.

Miss Nelson shoved the note at Sandra. "Really, Miss Papaldo, I wouldn't expect this from you, of all people. Shameful! Absolutely shameful!"

Sandra's face got kind of pale as she began to read the note.

That note was written because I'd given Sandra the eye and got just the faintest smile from her. Belle Rodrego, the leader of the Daggarettes had seen this. And this was for her, because she's always looking for a way to needle Chickie, who besides being my girl is the big wheel of the Sirens. After Belle told Chickie about us, Chickie wrote the note. Chickie wanted it passed around and then slipped to Sandra.

Handing the note back to the substitute, Sandra said in a shocked whisper, "I didn't write that."

"And if you didn't, who did?" Miss Nelson asked sharply.

Sandra's brown eyes flicked toward Chickie; she must have guessed who wrote that note.

I looked at Chickie and saw her eyes scream a silent warning to Sandra, "Don't squeal!"

"Well?" Miss Nelson said angrily.

Sandra's mouth was shut very tight, and she looked like she was in pain.

"All right. You're not telling me who wrote it, so I must assume you did. Come on, Sandra. Come along. I've no choice now, but to take you to the principal's office and recommend that you be expelled."

It was as if she'd hit the tall, dark chick. Sandra reeled, her eyes widening. "Expelled! Oh, no. Expelled . . ."

Glancing down at the note, old lady Nelson shook her head, real sore. "Don't you think you deserve to be expelled?" she said.

Getting no answer, she said, "Come along," and started for the door.

Sandra took a step, hesitated, looked over in Chickie's direction.

None of us really knew Sandra, so it was hard to figure how she was going to act. It was her first term at Maderro High and she stayed away from the gangs and our after school hang-outs.

We heard she'd come from some Greek island, and that when her parents were killed, an Aunt had brought her over to the U. S. There was even talk that she'd been with the guerillas in some of the fighting over in Greece, but nobody believed that crap; she was too square.

Now I saw that Sandra was breathing hard and her lips were moving, but she wasn't getting out a word. Then it came. "I tell," she said. She had a kind of an accent. She looked nervously back and forth between Chickie and Miss Nelson. Chickie started to get up, like she was getting ready to go for her, and Sandra pointed at her, holding her arm stiff as a damn poker. "I saw her writing note. I didn't know what she was writing. She—"

Sandra broke off because Chickie rushed down the aisle and lunged over a row of desks at her.

Chickie raked long fingernails down Sandra's smooth cheek before Miss Nelson could pry her off.

"Rat!" Chickie yelled. "You dirty stinkin' rat! I'll teach you to mess around with my steady."

Chickie straightened her white sweater, ramming it back into her green skirt.

"I'd give her worse'n that," Belle sneered.

Chickie saw Belle's fat brown face, its black eyes laughing at her. "I'll get her," she vowed. "Right after school, I'll get her."

"Let's get that squealer *now!*" Belle yelled.

Miss Nelson was screaming, trying to make everybody shut up, but nobody paid any attention to her.

"Fink!" one of Tony Lavenno's Slashers called over to Sandra. "We'll fix you!"

The guys were still talking up a riot and Miss Nelson was tapping a ruler against the edge of a desk, shouting, "Back in your seats! Quiet please, quiet!" when the principal and a couple of teachers came charging in to see what we were jarring the deck about this time.

Chickie broke out of the jam and got to my desk. "Switch," she said out of breath, "you tell them that dirty little cat is mine. Nobody else takes a crack at her before—"

A teacher grabbed Chickie. The others ganged up on her and they hustled her out. Miss Nelson, holding Sandra by the arm, followed right on their tail.

About half an hour before we got out of school, Sandra came back to class. Chickie hadn't come back yet. I knew they must still be raking her over the coals.

We pretended to study and pay no attention to Sandra, but man, those last minutes of school were a drag. Everybody couldn't wait to get at Sandra. She was in for the full treatment. I had to go along with the guys on this deal, even though I kind of liked this Sandra chick.

When the last bell sounded, my boys who're the Stallions, Tony Lavenno's Slashers, the Sirens, and Daggarettes, we all hung around at the bottom of the stairs, outside the building. Today, we weren't out to get each other—just Sandra.

We wait. Part of the time, we're waiting, we horse around. Mostly, though, we're quiet, or just say

something now and then, because we're all thinking what's ahead.

When Sandra came out of the building, she stopped at the head of the stairs and looked down at us. Altogether, there must have been maybe sixty guys and chicks. She was scared all right, but so as not to show it, she didn't waste too much time before she started down. She walked stiff, her lips pressed tight together, like she was daring us to do something.

Three Daggarettes stepped out, got right in front of Sandra. As Sandra tried to get around them, they jumped her.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Come off it."

One had Sandra around the middle, the other two had her arms, hauling away, trying to drag her. They had in mind to get her in the girl's head, down in the basement.

"Come off it!" I yelled again as I came up to them.

They stopped, all out of breath. Things happened fast then. Suddenly, Belle was standing in front of me, her eyes flashing, warning me to stay clear of this brawl.

Tony Lavenno shouldered Belle to one side. "Hands off," he told me. "The squealer's mine."

"And I say," I said, "Chickie gets first crack at her."

We stand there then. Each waiting for the other one to make a move, or to say something. I half-figured Tony to go for his knife and got set to spring in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that the Daggarettes had started up again, tugging Sandra off to the head and that Belle was helping now.

What really broke it up between me and Tony was Chickie suddenly popping out of the door, running down the steps and going for those Daggarettes and Belle. It was like a lot of tomcats in a bag, nails out, clawing and snarling. In the middle of the go, Sandra tried to make a break for it, but Chickie snagged her, got her by the damn ankle.

Chickie's hair looked like somebody had run an eggbeater through it. Usually, she has it combed back real neat.

She got up, making sure Sandra didn't get away from her. A hammer lock, when they got up on their feet, helped. The mean, out-of-breath way she looked kept Belle and any of the other Daggarettes from wanting to mix with her.

In spite of Chickie's hold, Sandra did some wriggling, but her face showed how every inch she moved was hurting her.

"You know what they did to me," Chickie yelled at Sandra, but it was for all of us to hear, too. "They threw the book at me. Expelled me. Snitched to the juve cops to investigate."

Everybody was quiet.

"Tough, baby," I said.

"So what you going to do to the squealer?" Belle asked, smirking real superior like.

I'm sure all Chickie had in mind right at the start was to give Sandra a good going over. But now that wasn't enough. She stood thinking, still breathing hard, undecided.

"Maybe Chickie's going to do a knife job on the squealer's face," Belle said, laughing and looking around at all of us.

"That's your speed," Chickie said. "A knife job. Come on." She started moving Sandra forward, pushing her in front of her. "I'm taking her to the pit. I'll show you how *I* fix a squealer."

Everybody started heading for the jalopies.

Jumping into my rod, I wound up the mill, pushed it in second, and waited for Chickie and Sandra to get in. When they did, I let the clutch out and we took off peeling rubber.

I led ten crates a wild chase out to the outskirts of town. About a mile on, I turned on the side road to the old gravel pit they didn't work anymore. The pit was where my gang and Chickie's made their headquarters. Before you get right into the pit, there's what used to be the construction shack.

Skidding to a stop beside the shack, we got out and waited for the others. I lit a cigarette, and passed one to Chickie. Sandra just shook her head when I asked her if she wanted one.

Tony and Belle came over.

Belle gave Chickie a smile that was mostly sneer and asked, "What're you gonna do to the Greek bitch?"

"I'm just waiting for everybody to get here."

"Chickie," Belle mused sarcastically. "They call you that because you're chicken."

Some of the Sirens in the crowd that had gathered around us looked at Chickie expecting her to do something about Belle's crack. Rita and another Siren took over holding Sandra.

"You lookin' for a beef?" Chickie finally said.

Belle nodded toward Sandra. "You better finish this first."

It was backing off, plain as the nose on Belle's face.

Lookouts were already being posted so if the school put the cops on us, we'd have plenty of time to quit the scene.

As Chickie turned toward the pit, she moved past Sandra.

There was a bewildered look on Sandra's face as she said, "Chickie, why are you so mad with me? You wrote those dirty words, you know you do this. So why do you—"

Chickie's right hand lashed out, slapping Sandra's cheek hard, jerking her head to one side. "And what about your tryin' to make out with Switch? Huh? You dirty Greek bitch."

Sandra glanced over at me, as though she didn't understand. And the way her face was screwed up, she looked like she had a pain in the gut.

"Take her down!" Chickie ordered, making an angry gesture toward the pit.

Then she marched off, leading the girls down the

bank to the floor of the pit. The Sirens who were holding Sandra were about in the middle of the parade. Me and my boys brought up the tail end; we wasn't too goddamned pleased with the whole deal.

On the floor of the pit, Chickie walked back and forth in front of Sandra. She was plenty sore, but she didn't seem like she was sure yet what she was going to do.

The girls had ripped Sandra's clothes until all she had on above the waist was a white bra, and it was sure filled nice. Sandra stood like a cast iron statue. No part of her moved except her eyes; they went back and forth, following Chickie.

Just as Chickie was going by Sandra for about the thousandth time, she whirled around. Her fist landed on Sandra's jaw—and so hard, the sound damn near echoed in the pit.

Sandra started struggling to break loose of the girls holding her, crazy-mad to get her hands on Chickie. When she saw she wasn't going to make it, she did something I never thought she had the guts to do—she spit right in Chickie's face.

Chickie drew a long breath through her open mouth, her eyes wide. The next second she was up close to Sandra, kicking her hard.

The chicks holding Sandra let go of her and she fell retching and crying in the gravel.

Chickie stood over her gloating.

When Sandra looked up at Chickie, tears were running down her twisted face and she was screaming a stream of Greek that didn't need any translator.

Nobody said anything. There was just the quiet and the sobs that were breaking out of Sandra every once in awhile.

"She hit you pretty low with what she said," Belle taunted Chickie.

"Shut up!"

"If it was me—I'd cut her good for that."

Chickie looked from Belle's face to Sandra's, where it met defiance, touched by fear. You almost felt the rage in Chickie, like it was heat from a furnace.

"*You'd* cut her," Chickie said real sarcastic, putting Belle in her place. "Me—*I'm gonna kill her.*"

That gave everybody a big jolt.

"Switch," Chickie was saying, "get the guns."

We had two .38 Police Specials hidden in the shack. We'd swiped the two of them about a year back, but we'd never used them. Just thought and talked about using them, but that was all.

I stared at Chickie, not believing she meant to kill Sandra. All she was doing was trying to scare the hell out of her—I thought—and at the same time impress Belle. She must have figured on Sandra going chicken, crying and crawling out of the spot she was in.

Chickie's voice was low and deadly. "I said get the guns."

Tony grinned at me. "Dad, she's on her stick. So let her ride it awhile."

I shrugged and gave Jimmy the nod. In a couple of minutes, he was back with the guns.

He looked real worried. "They won't use 'em will they?" he asked. "You know I'm on probation, and the cops—"

"Take it easy," I said. Hell, I knew Chickie'd never fired a gun before, not in her whole life.

Taking the guns, I walked over to her. Without looking I could tell that everyone was watching and wondering.

She looked the guns over, like she was trying to see if they was loaded. I said, "Play it cool, now."

For a split second, she was afraid I didn't believe she had the guts to put herself up for a murder rap. I could tell by the quick way she looked around, studying faces, to see if anybody felt the same way she thought I did.

"You don't have to do this, doll," I said to her.

That shoved her—I saw right off—just the way I didn't want her to go. "Stick around, honey," she said, cocky as hell. "You and Belle'll see some action."

Sandra had rolled over and was starting to get up.

Chickie jammed one of the guns into her hand. "You know what this is?"

Sandra didn't answer.

Chickie slapped her. "You know what it is?

"Yes."

"What—what is it?"

Sandra was acting like she didn't want to talk. "A gun," she said, like she was sorry she had to say it. "It's a gun."

"That's right, rat, and you'd better be able to use the thing."

"I—I do not want to use it, Chickie," Sandra said, begging. "This is so silly. We've had enough fighting. Put the guns away, and we'll forget—"

"Yeah!" Chickie exploded, "you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would like that."

"Looks like these two are going to kiss and make up," Belle said.

"Get lost!" I was sore. I gave Belle a shove.

She shoved back at me. "Don't you shove me," she said. "Just because your girl friend is yellow, don't think—"

"We're gonna fight it out!" Chickie announced, yelling it. She was showing Belle she wasn't yellow.

Some cheering went up.

"Clear the pit!" Chickie was still yelling. "You're gonna see action like you never seen!"

I wanted to grab Chickie. All she needed was an out. I even thought of clobbering her, but before I knew it I was climbing up the bank with the others, sitting down with them around the rim.

Chickie and Sandra stood about twenty feet apart in the level space at the bottom of the pit, looking lonely and out of place.

Sandra was standing straight, her red blouse hanging in ribbons at her waist, whipping in an occasional gust of wind like the tails of a lash. Her brown body stood out clear against the almost white, gravel.

"I'm gonna count to three," Chickie told her, loud enough for all of us to hear, "Then we start shootin' —okay?"

Even from where we were, we could see Sandra's face fade until it seemed like it was the same color as the gray-white gravel.

This was what Chickie had been waiting for. She looked up, making sure we'd all been impressed, then said, "There's one way out for you, you yellow Greek bitch." She moved the gun's barrel in a slow motion, pointing out a path that ran up the rough bank of the pit. "Crawl up over there on your belly. It ain't as bad as gettin' shot."

Sandra looked even more upset than she'd been. Her eyes went to the path Chickie had pointed out, like she was looking for a way out of a trap. "No," she answered—and it sounded like she meant it. "I do not crawl."

Maybe she'd had to crawl when she lived over in Europe, in Greece, and she didn't want to start doing the same thing in the U. S. Anyhow, she started hefting the gun now. Chickie stood, not doing or saying anything. She hadn't expected this. All she'd wanted to do was put on a big show for herself.

"Let's break it up before somebody gets killed," Rita said.

I could see the others felt the same way. Belle's wide lips were held firmly closed, and her thick hands were trembling. There were fine beads of sweat on Tony's forehead—the whole bunch was racked tight, waiting for somebody else to move.

Hell, if nobody else was going to do something, I was.

Getting up fast, I started down the bank, the gravel crunching under my feet sounded loud as tap drums.

Chickie watched me coming toward her. I had the feeling she was damn glad I was coming.

"Come on, doll," I said as I came up close. "Break this off. God damn it, enough's enough."

"Yeah," she said, but all it meant, the way she said it, was that she was still sore.

Her gaze flicked up to the rim of the pit. I could only guess it was at Belle.

"Why do you care what she thinks?" I said.

Sandra had come up to us and she told Chickie, "You listen to him. And maybe you don't get shot."

"Come on, doll," I said, like it was all settled, and put my hands to her shoulders to turn her around.

Slapping my hands away, she stepped back, her gun up. Right then I knew nothing I could say would stop her. I knew she was figuring if she backed out of this, she'd be a zero from then on far as the other chicks went.

I grabbed for her gun hand—and got it.

"Let go!" she yelled.

"No!"

We wrestled, straining and pulling trying to get the gun away from each other. And we were using every word from bastard on down.

I was the one who let go of the gun. You don't play around with a gun the way we was doing if you wanted to go on living.

Scrambling quickly out of reach, Chickie held the gun on me and shrieked, "Go on! Get back up there. Before I kill you, too."

I stood my ground and was just thinking of tackling her when the .38 in her hand went off.

I could almost feel the slug buzz near my ribs, and the whang as it bounced chilled me.

Chickie's eyes were glazed and wild. I didn't know but what she'd cut loose with a few more rounds, so I started backin' off.

As I passed Sandra, I yelled, "Run! She—she's flipped!"

But Sandra didn't budge. Something was holding her right where she was. Something I couldn't get no sense out of, but whatever it was, it was as strong as what was keeping Chickie from backing down.

The pit might as well have been quicksand. It was going to get one or both of them before this thing was over.

At the top of the bank, I dropped down between Rita and Jimmy again, shaking my head, knowing all I'd done was to bring the deal to a head a little quicker.

"One!"

Chickie half yelled, half shrieked it.

"Two!"

The muscles in Sandra's arm stood out tensely, all set to jerk up the gun she was holding.

It was suddenly awful quiet. Up to then I hadn't noticed the sound the wind was making in the trees out back of us.

"Let's stop!" Sandra called out in a steady voice. "You want no more to do this than I do."

It sounded as if she felt sorry for Chickie and wanted to give her one last out.

Sure as hell, Chickie took it the wrong way. She must have thought Sandra had finally broken—what she'd been aiming for all along.

"Okay, you yellow cat!" she screeched. "Go on! I'll let you go, but you gotta crawl. Go on! Crawl up that bank!"

Sandra's shoulders straightened. "Count!" she yelled.

She stood stiff as a soldier at attention, her right side turned toward Chickie. She doubled her arm, pointing the gun straight up, the tip of the barrel even with her eye. Her left hand rested at her waist. The heel of her left shoe touched the toe of the right one. You could tell that when her arm snapped out straight, the gun would be right on a line with Chickie. It was all smooth, practiced—like a guy going through the manual of arms routine, so

much so that I could almost see a uniform on her.

My stomach knotted up because I knew right then that that stuff about Sandra being in the war was true, and knew for sure that this show wasn't going to do a fade.

There was a nervous laugh, cut short.

Somebody swore as their foot dislodged a rock.

The rock started rolling down the side of the pit; and everybody seemed to be doing nothing but listening to the sounds it was making on the way.

When it touched bottom, Chickie yelled "Three!" as if that yell was something that had built up inside her until she just couldn't hold it any more.

And she started shooting.

Her first shot kicked up pebbles a yard to the right of Sandra; the second went wider still. The bullets ricocheted and sang close to our heads.

Sandra didn't even flinch. Her gun arm straightened with a quick movement. She sure looked deadly. She must have struck Chickie that way, too, because Chickie let go with two more shots, both of them wild by a yard.

Then the .38 in Sandra's hand cracked. Chickie's sobbing scream mingled with the echoes of the shots.

Blood spurted from somewhere above her right shoulder and seeped fast through her sweater. The gun dropped from her fingers as she reared back screaming, "Oh, God! I'm shot, I'm shot!"

The gun in Sandra's hand blasted again.

Chickie spun and fell, blood streaming from the other side of her face and spattering over the white gravel. Her eyes were bulging. She squirmed, pain filling her insane cries. She was holding her hands to the sides of her face and blood streamed out between her fingers.

I was sick. My stomach churned, trying to send everything up.

Sandra's voice was dry and harsh as she said something in Greek. Her gun followed Chickie's wriggling body as if it was no more'n a damn target in a shooting gallery.

"God," Rita yelled, "she's going to kill Chickie!"

I had to do something. Without thinking, I let out a howl as I jumped up.

Sandra jerked half way around, her gun dropping down near her waist, centering on me.

That yell of mine, I could see had broken the spell that'd been holding her.

"War's over," I told her, trying to smile.

I started toward her slowly. "All over." My grin was so tight it hurt. "You're all right now. Come on, Sandra, drop it . . ."

She shivered, shaking herself. It was suddenly like she knew where she was—right there in the pit, instead of being in some battle over in Europe.

She lowered the gun, glanced down at her half bare body, then at Chickie, and finally back at me. She was all straightened out now.

"Thanks . . ." she said, real low.

The gun dropped out of her hand and she began walking up the bank.

The gangs had started down into the pit, but they gave her plenty of room to go by.

I followed her, not knowing exactly why.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Hey. . . !"

She stopped, looking down at me, and beyond me to where the gangs had gathered around Chickie.

"You better make sure they get her to a doctor," she said, and turned and kept going.

I stood there thinking Chickie sure as hell wouldn't rate anymore and that this Sandra doll, from here on out, was for me. What a shot! And, man, what a wild body!

Determination Dept.

Like the Royal Mounted, Lenawee County sheriff's officers finally got their man at Adrian, Mich. It began when a pump was stolen from a federal warehouse. The preliminary investigation was fruitless, so officers wrote the pump manufacturer requesting notification if anyone ordered parts for the stolen pump.

Nine months later the manufacturer told deputies that a farmer had ordered parts. The farmer said he had bought the pump from a junk dealer. The dealer said he had traded a rifle to an Adrian man for the pump. The Adrian man had traded a rowboat to a Clayton man for the pump. The Clayton man said he had purchased the pump from Ezra Bertram of Cadmus.

When Bertram was picked up, he said: "Well, I guess you got me!"

Prouty was an Airport Detail cop. That was why he was hired to kill an innocent man.

TIME TO KILL

A Novelette

by JACK WEBB

EVERYBODY has one bad habit or another. With some men it's drink, and they go about dreaming of marrying a rich widow who owns a liquor store. Others can't stay away from figures, and they end up C.P.A.'s or chasing women, depending on which kind of figures they can't stay away from. With me, it's names and faces, faces and names. Nineteen times out of twenty-two, I can put them together. In my business, that's good. I'm a cop.

Last Friday afternoon, I should have had amnesia. Last Friday, I should have stayed in bed.

And, those were my precise, absolute and irrevocable thoughts as Flight 947 dipped down over the necklace of hills which gives Phoenix, Arizona, the time-honored bravado of calling itself, "The Valley of the Sun."

Two hours before, out in the smog belt on the coast, I had only been doing my duty as a sergeant of police assigned to the Airport Detail. Now, I was heading into Phoenix to meet a woman who wanted me to kill her husband.

Who was the woman? What did she look like? I didn't have the faintest idea. I did have a name. Mrs. Randall Smith. I also had a hotel room number. Room 423, Hotel Westward Way. But I wasn't to go to the room. I was to phone from the lobby and announce that Marcus Jones had arrived.

Inasmuch as Marcus Jones was supposed to be Willie "Pistol" Marsh and I was standing-in for Willie while he languished in an L.A. jail on a concealed weapons charge, you can begin to gather the complications.

It was one hundred and nine degrees Fahrenheit when we debarked at Sky Harbor. So, I knew things were going to be even warmer than I had planned. The airport bus smelled of hot leather and hotter metal. Twenty-five minutes later, I walked into the lobby of the Westward Way, looked about for a hidden iceberg, and wallowed in the grand, refrigerated air.

A redhead in a backless, strapless, almost-frontless affair languished a skyblue glance in my direction not much cooler than the weather, and I began to feel not half so badly about having identified Willie "Pistol" Marsh at the Coast-Aire Reservation Desk and taking his place on the 1:30 flight. The hasty orders for the substitution had come from downtown and I wondered if Captain Cantrell had gotten through to the Phoenix police.

A policeman's life, I reflected, *is not a happy one.* So, I forewent the redhead, the oasis of the bar and headed for the bank of house phones along the far wall.

The voice on the other end of the line was as cool as a dry martini and had the same middle-of-the-body excitement.

"Marcus Jones here," I said.

"You are in the lobby?"

"I am."

"Excellent. Now, turn your head so you can see the chairs set against the pillars, facing the elevators. Is the one on the right as you step from the elevators empty?"

"Sure," I said. "I can see it."

"Will you purchase a *Time* magazine and take that chair? If I haven't contacted you within ten minutes, return to the airport and go back to Los Angeles."

"Now, look, lady." I tried to sound as I thought Willie would.

"I'm gambling a thousand dollars," the fire-in-ice voice said, "scarcely a tip you would leave for a waiter."

I remembered the nine brand new one-hundred dollar bills that had been in Willie's wallet. "Okay," I said.

I found the magazine rack in the coffee shop and gave my money to a brunette who had slid into her red sheath with a shoehorn. The advantages of hot weather were most apparent.

In the chair against the pillar, I leafed through the magazine. The elevator opposite opened. A couple came out arm in arm. The girl was in frothy cotton and the boy with her was wearing Bermuda shorts. Then came a little man in a seersucker suit, a string tie and a perforated straw hat. I returned to the magazine and waited for the next delivery.

A voice at my elbow said, "I'm truly surprised, Mr. Jones. I didn't expect you to appear at all as you do. You will do very well, I believe."

I could feel the color plowing up the back of my neck even as I stumbled to my feet. Of course, she had sent me for the magazine so she would have time to be in the lobby before I arrived at the appointed chair.

"You're smart," I told her in Willie's most admiring voice.

"Thank you. Now, perhaps, you should buy me a drink. The lounge will not be crowded for another hour."

We took a dim booth in the far corner. She asked for scotch over rocks. She named the brand. I ordered the same. You needed a certain mellowness to sit in a shady nook with a woman like this, even when your intentions were murder. She was an ash blonde with a skin the color of honey and she was wearing an expensive something that was sheer and soft and black altogether. Her eyes, now, were deep. In the brightness of the lobby they had been restless and grey.

I nearly jumped when I felt the hand on my knee.

"Money," she said, smiling brightly. "You're not expected to pay for the refreshments, and there will be a car to rent, and an outfit of western clothes."

There were five bills, as neatly stacked as an uncut deck and each had a twenty in the corner.

The water deposited our liquor, made change from my small fortune, and departed.

2.

She said, "First, in case any of my acquaintances should drop by our table, I'll introduce you as Mr. Marcus Jones, a salesman for *Halo Creations.* You manufacture a custom line of millinery. I own a hat shop, so there will be no questions. I won't permit us to discuss business. Only one thing might be important. You should come from New York."

"I can handle that."

"Good. Now, listen to me carefully. Do you know Westville?"

I shook my head.

"Westville," she said, "is a suburb of Phoenix. It's a curious combination. It's a home for millionaires and it's a clipjoint for tourists. It started as a sort of reincarnation of a gay nineties village with very plush shops to intrigue the money class and then expanded to take in the winter tourists. My husband was one of the founders—not that he founded the town, you understand—but he helped boost it from a historical backwash into a pretty fair sized boom."

"So?"

She took up her story. "Tonight, the Westville Mavericks are having their annual barbecue. They all dress as cowhands and such; that's why you'll need your western outfit." She paused and searched in her purse. "This will get you in." She handed me a badge with a blue ribbon below it of the sort they award prize bulls. It read: *Maverick's Corral—1957.*

"And where does this shindig take place?"

"In Westville, a mile north, actually, on the Westville Road. You can't miss the grove. There will be a chuckwagon at the turn-off."

I had finished less than half of my drink. Her restless glance observed. "You're not too much given to drink," she said. "I had wondered about that. My husband would have had three in the time we have been here."

"How will I know him?" I kept my voice soft.

"Judge Baker?" Both of her hands were around her own glass. She stared at her silver nails. "You can't miss him, Mr. Jones. His white hair flows. His whiskey flows. And he also enjoys his position as a historical landmark."

"I see." I toyed with my drink. I thought that I knew only too well. Age, liquor, money, a position, all the arrogance of those, all flowering together toward some eternity not quite near enough. I glanced at her across the table, as slim as a falcon, as tailored, as beautiful. A girl who wanted to go places, or to a lover; a girl who played with a hat shop and the idea of murder.

"Don't worry about the rest of your money," she said. "It'll not be tied up. Johnny will have it within twenty-four hours of your success."

She raised her glass. "Here's to your success," she said.

I watched her leave the bar, a tall blonde, walking elegantly. Something expensive, something lovely. I hated the things which had to be done.

3.

Next door to the hotel, I rented a car, a neat and shiny white convertible. The police department was on the ground floor of the Court House. Lieutenant Madriaga would see me.

He rose from behind a yellow desk and shook hands carefully. "I've been expecting you," he said. His suit was a light grey Dacron as beautifully tailored as a television detective's. His dark hair was lightly flecked with grey. Each of his nails had perfect moons. His eyes were as black and as sharp as a raven's.

I produced the proper credentials. He waved me into a chair.

"You have," he said, "met the woman." He smiled.

I nodded.

"Mrs. Giles Baker," he told me. "I was amazed! I was astonished!"

"You were there?" Between him and the blonde, catching me off base, I was ready to turn in my badge.

"Of course. You have no idea . . ."

"He is a bigwig, then?"

"Immense!" Madriaga waved a hand at the ceiling. "An institution. Also," his smile broadened with his own humor, "very well endowed."

"She paid a thousand dollars just to have a look at me. When I've done my bit, I'm to get the rest of my money from Johnny Rose. She called him Johnny. I'm guessing the Rose from Willie Marsh's connections. You know Rose, I suppose. Cleveland until 1952; then he became one of our problems."

He nodded, and then watched me, rubbing his fingertips together. "What do you propose to do next, Sergeant?"

"Me?" I stood up and put my hands on his desk. "I've done my act. Now, it's in your hands."

"Oh, no, Sergeant Prouty, not in our hands at all. If it were, it would be exceedingly simple. Westville, however, is outside our jurisdiction. It is an incorporated town. It has its own police force."

"Well, then," I put my hands in my pockets and looked down at him, "I suppose I'll have to drive out to Westville."

Lieutenant Madriaga chuckled. "A capital idea. Still, in all fairness, there are a few things I should tell you. First, the least. My brother-in-law is on the force out there. He is a louse. This, unfortunately, is typical. Second, the chief of police is named Grantland Barker. Chief Barker is Mrs. Baker's father. Just how will you approach this, Sergeant? It makes for an interesting problem." His dark eyes were merry.

I grinned back at him with all my boyish good humor. "It seems," I told him carefully, "that you and your brother-in-law have much in common."

"Now, now, Sergeant. I sympathize with you. The situation is unique. Still, in the matter, I have no more authority than yourself." He shrugged. He made it an elegant gesture, extending it into his arms, and thrust his palms outward.

"That leaves the judge," I said slowly. "What sort of a character is he?"

"How does one know?" Madriaga asked. "He has been the figurehead so long, what is the real man? Best quarter horses in the county. Several pens of fancy chickens, so who's to notice there are game cocks among them? The loveliest fighting reds you ever saw, all pared down with combs and wattles shaved away, spurs carved for steel gaffs. A neat little sixteen-room ranch house. All of these things to surround a small man of fine stature. Sometimes I think he should be a statue on his own lawn." Madriaga flashed his perfect smile. "Except for the pigeons, of course."

"Thanks, for nothing."

There was a map of the county in the glove compartment of my rented car. A number of roads led to Westville.

I headed out of town. It was like driving through a landscaped oven. Here and there, the water stood six inches deep on sunken lawns. It was the way they watered. There were a surprising number of trees. In the white, dead heat of late afternoon, they stood without moving a leaf. No birds sang.

I was out on the valley road. Four lanes, and what traffic there was, made its own breeze. Irrigation ditches were on either side. The water in them changed from green to brown. It appeared deep.

A big bronze sedan came up behind fast. I didn't pay much attention. Most Arizonians seemed to drive as though they had found a faster horse and were riding it into the ground.

The bronze car blatted its horn. With nothing coming against us, I held my speed. It swung to my left to pass and I grinned at the combination of ten gallon hats and dark glasses shading the two men on the front seat.

When the grill of the big car was even with my front fender, things happened fast. The driver of the sedan pulled hard right and slammed into me. I was doing better than fifty, he had twenty miles on that. I lunged off the road, jumped an incline, teetered on the edge of the irrigation ditch for a rattling instant and rolled in.

4.

A movie stunt driver named Mascari saved my life. He didn't know it, and would never remember the night I heard him talk in a saloon south of Malibu. But, when I knew there was nothing I could do but go with the car, I rolled onto the front seat, grabbed a door handle with both hands, braced my feet against the door opposite took a deep breath and prayed that neither of the doors would spring.

When I surfaced in the dirty water, the bronze sedan was two miles down the road. I climbed up on the bank and got my breath in the shade of some oleanders. On the other side of the flowering shrubs was a field. I found a place sheltered from the road and hung out things to dry, pants, gun, money, the works. It gave me half an hour to think. A hell of a lot of people seemed to know I was in town.

Things got dry finally. I walked a quarter of a mile and found a control section where I could cross the broad, turbulent ditch.

A couple of girls picked me up. The top was down on their streamlined spaceship and each of them were wearing six items: Shorts, staved halters, sun glasses, two sandals and skins of solid mahogany. Norma thought I was cute and interesting. Nell thought I was wrinkled and smelled rather oddly.

After we arrived in Westville, I bought them a drink at *Gussie Belle's* and we talked about the town.

Shirley Baker's hat shop was "the most." Judge Baker also had an office in town, *Westville Realtors & Investments,* and if you could see the chick he kept at the desk therein, well, really . . .

I hated to leave those four long lovely tan legs and go for a walk in the sun. My first stop was a western clothing store.

Feeling foolish in high-heeled boots, I went down the street between the handsome shops. In one of the windows, were a number of scorpions embedded in plastic like ancient scarabs in amber. I paused and heard a knowing tourist explain, "It's the thin, pale ones that are dangerous." I wondered who would wish to wear a scorpion for a jewel. I wondered, too, about Mrs. Shirley Baker.

Her hat shop was called *Desert Rose.* The hats in the window hung on a basketwork of bleached dry cacti, or lay upon a white-white beach of crystal sand. Sequin and velvet snakes with rhinestone eyes arched among the chapeaus. Not a price tag was in view. The girl inside, waiting on the carriage trade, also appeared expensive enough to bring in the husbands. There was no sign of Mrs. Baker.

Beyond the line of shops at the next corner was a garage. The big bronze sedan turned into it with only the driver in the car. You could see where the Ford had mangled the right front fender and left scars down the side and across the front door.

I wandered along down the street. I had decided this was one s.o.b. I could nail. When I reached the big, shady entrance to the garage, the boy who had shoved me in the ditch was talking to a mechanic. The garage man was looking at the big car and shaking his head. My "friend" was pinning a badge above the pocket of the tan shirt he wore. I kept on walking.

The sign on the front of the adobe office read, *Westville Realtors & Investments.* From wells of desert stone, bougainvillea clambered up the rough exterior and tossed flags of purple over the shake roof. Through a glass door, I could see the blonde receptionist. The difference that put her in the judge's front office and Mrs. Baker in his bed was very slight.

I had my hand on the door when a man emerged from the office behind the bleached desk and matching blonde. He was a big man with crisp grey hair tight and short against his skull under the broad brim of his white Texas hat. There also was a badge on his chest. I held the door open for him. He smiled with a mouth full of strong, white teeth.

"Thanks, stranger. If you're looking for a home in Westville, you've come to the right place." He strode on down the walk in the direction of the

garage. Ridiculously there were a pair of navy-size captain's bars on the tabs of his western shirt. This, then, was Mrs. Baker's father and one of the two men who had murdered me. My own brand-new cowboy suit saved me, I suppose. I looked so much like the uncomfortable dude here to cure my asthma, or God-knew-what, that he never gave a second look to the man he had tried to kill little more than an hour ago.

I did not go on into the office. If this man had come smiling from the judge, my incredible story would sound like the babbling of a madman. I walked down the street and found a place where they served beer. It was two hours until the *Maverick's Barbecue.*

Along with the beer, it hit me like a froth of bubbles. What an idiot I'd been. The first thing I should have done was look up Chief Barker of the Westville Police. He and his man had tried to kill me on the road into town because he thought I was the professional killer his daughter had hired. He had made his desperate attempt because he could not take the chance of pulling in Willie "Pistol" Marsh after he came to town. If Willie were picked up, he might start blabbing and, even if it were in the privacy of an interrogation room, the word still might slip out that the chief's own daughter had hired a murderer. It was a ridiculous chance he had taken, but I couldn't help but understand and, to an extent, sympathize. All I had to do was show up in his office, explain who I *really* was, forgive him for knocking ten years off my life in the irrigation ditch, and everything would be settled.

The girl behind the bar told me where I could find the local constabulary. I shoved off my stool and headed down the street.

5.

The tan stucco building had a flag flying before it and on the front wall a series of "Wanted" posters. The deputy behind the desk looked as though he spent his rising hours dressing before his T.V. set instead of his mirror. I presented my credentials and asked for Chief Barker.

The deputy disappeared through a heavy oak door and returned at once, followed by the big man I had helped out of Judge Baker's realty office. "Come in, Sergeant, come in." He held out his hand. "I'm Chief Barker." His eyes narrowed. "Say, didn't I see you about twenty minutes ago, going into Judge Baker's?"

"I never went in," I told him, grinning. "After I saw you, coming out, I had some thinking to do."

"Come on in." He held the door open for me. His voice wasn't quite as pleasant as it had been . . .

The tall, lean deputy who had driven the car into the garage was in the office. He had a long, angular head with very dark hair worn full and brushed from over the ears. He was standing with his back to us, peering out through the slant of Venetian blinds. He glanced around as we entered and then went back to watching the bright, hot white scene of the street.

Behind the chief's desk was a chair upholstered in rawhide. He offered me one only a little less sumptuous and we faced each other across a wide expanse of oak and a dual pen set with a small gold plaque on it which stated Chief Melvin Barker had been *Master Maverick, 1955-56.* A blower was pushing a lot of cold air from somewhere. It felt fine to sit there.

"Now, Sergeant, if you'll tell us what brought you to our little village?" His smile was friendly. His bright blue eyes were not.

I told my story with a few reservations. I left out my visit with Madriaga and the fact I knew Mrs. Baker was Chief Barker's daughter. I told about my adventure with the bronze sedan but not that I had seen it in Westville. I faced these men who might have been my murderers and put on an act with precisely one intention, to get the affair out of my hands and into theirs. What the chief would do about his daughter's desire to murder her husband, I didn't have the faintest idea. Law in Westville was a curious thing.

When I had finished, Barker pulled at the thick fingers he had entwined across his chest and I could hear the knuckles crack.

"It's a crazy story," he said finally. "Still, you wouldn't have come all the way from L.A. unless something screwy was up." He paused and considered me and my story through doubtful slits for eyes. "Know anything about this Mrs. Baker other than that she's the judge's wife?"

"She's a beautiful woman," I said, "apparently a lot younger than her husband. Smart, too, if you were to guess from the hat shop she runs here." Then to make it sound as though I were speaking straight from the shoulder, I threw in an official question. "One thing we would like to know is how she got onto Johnny Rose?"

"Sure," he nodded, "if we get anything on that . . ." He scratched the back of his head. "Excuse me, Sergeant, but might I see your credentials? My clerk out front said they were *bona fide.* But this is an unusual situation and . . ." He made an apologetic gesture with his thick hands.

I tossed my I.D. card and badge on the desk. He opened the folder and studied them. Then, he raised his eyes and met my glance as though he had come to a decision. "In view of the barbecue this evening," he said, "this is a ticklish situation. Are you armed, Sergeant?"

Opening the denim jacket I had included in my cowboy suit so I'd have some place to conceal a weapon, I showed him the butt of my revolver.

"Police positive?" he asked.

I pulled out the gun. "A .357 Magnum."

Chief Barker sighed. "Phil," he said, addressing the deputy at the window. The tall man turned.

"Wouldn't it appear this stranger with his crazy story has pulled a gun on me?"

The whole business was so fantastic, that the deputy hit me before I knew which ball game we were playing in or what the score was. The hard edge of his right hand sliced down and caught my wrist. My gun jumped and I heard it slam onto the fancy desk top even as the deputy snapped a left fist into my belly and met my descending chin with a driving right. It all took less than three seconds and it was a damned efficient job. Even the shower of stars was brief.

Later on, there were many things and I lay for a long time, trying to separate and sort them. First, there was a damned sore jaw, then there was a hot aching hole where my stomach should have been, and finally there was the sweat-awful odor from my warm, damp clothes, and all of these were part of me. Then, there were the dirt and gravel which served me for a couch and the stars in the sky which I finally realized were real. And somebody groaned, me, and tried to sit up, and I wondered where in the desert I had been dumped. The sand was hot under me, the air hot and still around me. I remembered the 109 temperature in which I had arrived in Phoenix and I wondered how long I'd last in the morning heat, beat-up, hatless and with nothing to drink.

One thing about being a cop, you don't choose the work if you're the type likely to panic. I never thought I'd even come close. But there, in the star-bright oven darkness, I had some nasty minutes. The jungle of a tough beat in a tough town is nothing compared to the big, hot, empty something of space and more space, of scorpions that skitter and snakes that crawl. Down the line someplace, a coyote yowled.

And I said, *"Prouty, you're not scared,"* and I was lying, and I said, *"Prouty, you got to figure something,"* and this was for sure. *"The one thing in your favor,"* I said, *"is time. They couldn't have come too far and they couldn't have carried you far from the road they used."* Even though I'd worked hard to invent them, I didn't much care for my comforting thoughts. Flying into Phoenix, you see a hell of a lot of roads going nowhere toward nothing. Hot sand, brown bare mountains, a curious pattern of twisted tough little shrubs that might shade a lizard, not a man.

I worked at getting to my feet. It was just as hot standing as it had been lying and sitting and a hell of a lot more unsteady. As far as I was concerned, I was in the middle of an inverted bowl full of stars and which way did I go from there? I felt through my pockets to see if they had left me my lighter. If I could find their boot tracks . . .

There was no lighter, no billfold, no folder with badge and I.D. card, no change. No anything! My bet was on the long-haired character for stripping me that clean. I tried to figure what Captain Cantrell would do back in headquarters when I failed to report in. He would call Madriaga. The lieutenant would tell him I had gone to Westville. The wrecked convertible would be traced back to me, seem to indicate I'd never made it. Chief Barker would simply say I'd never shown in his town.

I decided my best bet was to walk twenty-five paces forward, fifty paces back, then reverse for another twenty-five paces with the hope I could return somewhere close to the point I had started from. Then, as near as I could make it in the dark, I would repeat the process from one side to another. And, if I were very lucky, I might find a road somewhere in the cross I had walked.

6.

There was enough light from the stars so that I was not quite blind. Arizona stars are much closer, much brighter than my home-town variety. Not that I'd trade, given the choice.

I made my first twenty-five paces, kicking rocks, breaking shrubbery and making the very devil of a racket. I turned around and started back, trying not to let anything I bumped into lose my count of fifty.

"Prouty, Sergeant Prouty!"

I froze. They were back. Slowly, I moved down into a crouch, became one more shadow among shadows. If I could get my hands around either of their stinking, murderous throats!

"Prouty, this is Lieutenant Madriaga. Where are you?"

"Jesus Christ," I said, weakly.

"I will return to my car," Madriaga said, "and turn on the lights. Can you make it all right by yourself?"

"You bet!"

The two headlights came on and he started the engine. I stumbled toward the car. It was a small, black M.G., one of the older models, square and handsome. Madriaga was equally incredible there on the edge of hell. He was wearing an ice-cream striped seersucker suit, a blue visored cap with a red pompon in the crown of it and a pair of colored glasses. The angel Gabriel couldn't have looked better.

I sat doubled in the bucket seat, half-sick and half in heaven. If Lieutenant Madriaga ever wanted a year or two off my life, he could have them any time. Suddenly, uncontrollably, I began to laugh.

"Poor little sergeant," Madriaga said, "they hit you too hard on the head."

"No," I choked, tried again, and made it. "It's

that damned silly tassle on the top of your head and the colored glasses. If the ghosts of the Seventh Calvary are riding tonight, don't you wonder what they might do?"

"The cap," Madriaga said mildly, "I'm fond of. The glasses, if you'll take a closer look, are shooting glasses, they don't cut down the light, they improve it. It's rather difficult, driving these roads without lights, you know, especially when your friends were using theirs. When they turned around and came back, I had to take to the desert. I needed to see what I could see to find a bush to hide behind. And I had to leave the road far enough that their headlights would not pick up the chrome on my bug."

"Sorry. God knows, I never was more happy to see anyone!"

"It's nothing." He waved with one hand. "Are you up to attending a picnic?"

"Westville Mavericks?"

"Right. Will you tell me, please, why you went to Barker?"

I did.

"Yes," he said, "I think the picnic is most important. Though not through the front door, of course."

At a filling station still open on the edge of nowhere, he drove around to the side, parked by the restrooms and brought me the key. The man in the mirror showed me why he had bothered. Ten minutes with tepid water from the cold tap and powdered soap removed the dried blood and most of the grime. Didn't do much for the burned-out eyes or the shape and color of my jaw.

Twenty minutes later, we approached the grove where the Mavericks were holding their annual barbecue. We drove by the chuckwagon which marked the entrance to the park, looked down a dusty road where lights were strung and could smell the rich scent of barbecued meat hanging heavy in the still air.

"Actually," Madriaga explained, "the grove extends along the edge of a draw which has been utilized as an irrigation canal. The festivities are about a quarter of a mile from the wagon back there." He swung the little car off the road, we bumped over rough ground, slid under some low branches that slapped us in the face and came to a halt.

"What are we up to?"

"Saving the judge's life, I hope." He smiled. "After all, he is a monument, Sergeant."

7.

The judge would be easy to spot, the police lieutenant said. His white hair, the fact that he looked like a judge and he would be seated in a chair designed to give comfort to a semi-invalid, all these would make it simple to find the target. Our job, however, would not be to watch the target, but rather to concentrate on anyone slipping casually from view, or dodging around in the darkness outside the parade of lanterns.

Madriaga put a hand on my shoulder before we climbed from the car. "I'm sorry there was no time to stop for food and coffee. It may be a long night."

"One thing," I said, "if we want to get in touch?"

"This is Indian country," the lieutenant told me. I could feel he was smiling. "Do you know the call of the pygmy owl?"

"Good Lord, no."

"Listen carefully." He whistled softly. A sad little call that didn't say *WHOO* at all. "Try it."

"Are you kidding?"

"No. I'm perfectly serious." He made the noise again.

I made a noise, too, a pretty sad noise but not like an owl.

And on that shaky arrangement, we began our stalk along the edge of the canal, sticking to the shadows, moving slowly. The closer we came to the shindig, the less reason there was for quiet. There were a hell of a lot of men playing cowboy. The plank table which served as a bar looked as though a distillery had been plundered and at least a dozen men with arms and glasses entwined were singing *Home On The Range.*

The judge sat off to one side. He had a string tie carelessly tied at the throat of a tailored western shirt. He wore no hat on his magnificent head and in the lantern light, his face was like wax and the color of saddle soap. I thought of his wife, of the sleek, chic, thirtyish, young woman with the restless grey eyes and couldn't blame her such a hell of a lot.

Then, I saw her father, big and beefy and grinning with a fistful of liquor in his fat hand. So, I said to hell with the lot of them, the Bakers, the Barkers, and all the ersatz cowboys who had come to plague this dead, hot land.

And, perhaps, that helped, because not giving a damn whether he lived or died, I was able to face the problem as though it were on a chess board and see the way the players were grouped and how he stood out as the king. *White king to check in one move,* I said to myself.

I studied the play. Behind him was the big table where the barbecued meat was stacked and there a half dozen or more were picking bits from this hickory platter or that and stuffing a French roll with the meat. To his right was the table which served as the bar, two dozen men there, all noisy, all thirsty. To his left the cowboy chorus had moved to *I'm An Old Cowhand.* It was a warm party, a good party, a going party; and it had Judge Baker surrounded. Only from where I crouched and peered through the foliage did the judge offer a free and perfect target. I was on the right side of the board. I slipped back from the edge of light

and there in the darkness, I looked and listened. Waited for the player to make his final move.

The player who should have been me—the substitute called in at the last moment.

Then I saw it and it was almost beside me. The shadow of a man, a spook from a western movie, a touch of light on a tan tall hat, a gleam of light on a blue steel barrel, the man using a fork in the tree to hold his sidearm steady.

8.

I slid under the drooping, sad, half needles of the tree that had shadowed me, picked up speed when I saw there was nothing between me and the gunman, hit him shoulder-on, hit him hard and flat beneath the cage of his ribs, felt him give and grunt with surprise, and fall, half-rolling, and never let out a cry. Here was a tough boy. One for the books.

Then we both were coming to our feet. I was so full of the thing that had been done to me that I was ready to kill, not for the judge's sake, for mine. And so was he. And there, in the shadows, he had an advantage, a knife. I saw the gleaming blade of it; here and there the shine of well kept steel in the bits of light that came through the leaves.

A knife's a nasty thing. I'd have given something for a kitchen chair or a bar stool. We did our little dance there on the perimeter of the Maverick's Barbecue. Each watching, each feinting a little. Neither trying to get away. With my left hand, I reached for my belt, unbuckled it, changed my hand over to the buckle, and pulled the belt free of my tight pants. It was a big, cheap western buckle and I kept it in my left hand until my right found the tongued end of the leather. I had a weapon, now, not much of a weapon, but enough to make my play. And in the shadows, I started it whirring, a bee noise, a wasp noise.

Then he made his lunge; fast and driving cleanly, bringing the knife up from below, and I cut down on the shining death with my belt. Felt the leather coil around his wrist. Felt him jerk with the belt tightly bound about his arm. Felt the other end of the leather slip from my fingers while his hand still held the knife. And I knew I was going to die.

I cut down at the wrist that held the knife with the side of my hand. I tried to hold Death back.

The explosion was sharp and loud. It stopped the man. It stopped the party. It came from Lieutenant Madriaga's gun. And just before the crowd broke through to us, he said, "Baby, you should have made like an owl."

The dead man was the deputy named Phil. The one who had rolled me into a ditch, the one who had knocked me out, taken even the pennies from my pockets and then left me in the desert to die.

Chief Barker tried to take over.

Madriaga didn't give him a chance. The slim, dapper, odd little man had the chief in a fine pair of steel bracelets before anything could get out of hand. He was splendid to watch, that lieutenant from Phoenix.

Before we left the picnic, he walked over to Judge Baker. "I will be out to see you in the morning," he said. "I am very sorry, sir."

We took Barker back to town, Phoenix, not Westville, in his own official car. I drove. Madriaga sat in back with the chief, and the body of the deputy was doubled into the trunk.

They had made their mistake when they trundled me outside the city limits of Westville. That was a concrete crime. And that was when Madriaga had ceased to be a bird watcher and had moved in to take an active part.

And, by having the kidnapping to deal with, to use as a crow bar, we were able to jockey and to trade, to get the truth for forgetting some of the insults and injuries done to me.

The rest of the story was pathetic, a twisted tangle of avarice and mercy. Barker, his restless daughter, and the judge had all been in it together.

Judge Baker was a dying man. He had been for a long time. In the last few months it had been pushing him hard. And it was he, according to Barker, who had talked his wife and her father into arranging his death. His death would be a kindness to him—and if he were killed, well, there was more than a hundred grand in double indemnity involved. It was Chief Barker who had made the arrangements with Johnny Rose, who in turn had sent Willie "Pistol" Marsh.

The lieutenant, himself drove me to the six o'clock plane. Over coffee at *Sky Harbor,* he asked, "You have guessed the identity of the deputy who took your place as the killer for ten thousand dollars in promises?"

"You mean that he was the one who drove me into the ditch?"

"No, no!" Madriaga cried. He tapped on the counter with his nervous fingers. "Not that, my dear Sergeant. This Phil Ortiz was the one I told you about, the man who was married to my sister."

"Lord," I said, "I'm sorry."

"But no," the lieutenant grinned. "That is the last thing you should be. My sister is a good woman. Very devout. All her life she would have had to live with this scoundrel. Now, she is free to marry again. Some good man, respectable."

I looked out across the dusty field to the brown, dead mountains. Not yet six o'clock, the sun was flat and white and almost the size of a wash tub.

"We're a long way from home," I said.

I can't escape. There's nothing I can do . . .

they're going to kill me

by BOB BRISTOW

FOR THE first time in his life, Carl Polcyn was important, and he felt sick and weak in the stomach. He sat in the chair, shifting positions, looking at his suit, a dark green striped suit too big for his frail body. It wasn't his suit. It had belonged to his brother, Gus, and when Carl agreed to testify, he had found it in the back of the closet. Gus hadn't worn it much because he was nearly always in his uniform, and what good does a cop get out of a bunch of clothes unless he's got a girl? Gus hadn't.

The only necktie Carl could find was a brown one with stripes. He didn't know if brown stripes went with green stripes, but it didn't matter. He just knew they wanted him to wear a tie and suit to court. He found the tie in Gus' top drawer, and beside it was Gus' practice revolver. Carl had looked for a long moment at the revolver, and it was then that the weakness, the nervousness began. He had painted on some shoe polish, but the polish didn't help the old shoes very much. He dressed in the suit, a full size too big. Carl didn't eat breakfast. He didn't think he could keep it down.

For an hour the prosecuting attorney had been speaking to the court and Carl didn't hear his name, not until it was called a second time. He stood, feeling the trousers legs droop over his shoe tops, the large shoulders of the coat slump and the sleeves slip down to the palms of his hands. He was nervous . . . afraid. He walked slowly across the floor and stopped when a man stood suddenly before him with a Bible.

"State your name," the man said.

"Carl Polcyn," he answered softly.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole . . ."

Carl listened, his mind a fog, because he didn't know if he was going to tell the truth to them. He wondered what his brother would want him to do now. A silence crept through to his brain and he realized that the man had finished. The man was staring, like a God of justice, bald-headed, stern-eyed, tight-lipped before him.

"Do you?" the man asked.

"Yes," Carl said.

"Be seated," the man said.

Carl climbed up two steps and sat down, aware that the eyes of the entire court rested on him, on his baggy suit, his crazy tie. Carl looked over the courtroom. Nick Chetizky was dressed in a navy blue tailored flannel suit. Nick's eyes were steady, like two small chunks of black marble against a white sheet-like face. Nick was smiling faintly, and Carl knew that the smile was for him and behind it was the power of twenty guns, each as deadly as those dark black eyes.

What do you want me to do, Gus? What do you want me to do now?

Mr. Warren, the County Prosecutor, came across the room to the chair and put his foot on the first step. For a long moment he too stared at Carl. Everything depended on what Carl said. They both knew that. But there were some things that Mr. Warren didn't know. He didn't know about the phone call last night. He didn't know what would happen if Carl did tell the whole truth.

Carl sighed and glanced about the courtroom. Out there were several of Nick's hoods, sullen-faced, watching. There were the curious, the reporters. Carl didn't know any of them except the hoods that worked for Nick. Them he had seen.

On his left the jury box was filled, each man and woman scrutinizing his face.

"Your name is Carl Polcyn. Is that right?"

Carl turned to Mr. Warren, who now stood a few feet away. "Yes sir."

"State your relationship to Gus Polcyn."

"He was my brother."

"Where do you live?"

"2609 East Honore."

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes."

"Before the death of Gus Polcyn, where did he live?"

"He lived with me."

"At the flat on Honore?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long had you lived together?"

"About four years. When Gus got out of the army, he brought me to live with him."

"Before that, where did you live?"

"I stayed at an orphanage."

"Are your mother and father dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"How old were you when you began living with your brother in the flat?"

Carl subtracted the years, his eyes catching the steady knife-like stare of Nick Chetizky. "I was fourteen."

"That makes you eighteen now?"

"Yes, sir."

"You said you moved into the apartment when your brother returned from the army. What was his job?"

"He was a policeman."

"Did your brother ever discuss his police work with you?"

Carl hesitated. He knew how easy it would be to make a slip, to get in too deep. "Yes."

"What was his job on the police force?"

"Well . . . he had several."

"During the last six months of his service, what was his job?"

"He was promoted to sergeant of the vice squad. He was an investigator."

"Did he ever discuss his investigations with you?"

Carl noticed the slightest movement in Nick Chetizky's chair. He felt alone, as though the world was closing in on him, isolating him. He knew he had to be careful. There was a specific place to go wrong. But where was it? What was he going to say when the big one came? If he could only talk to Gus for five minutes, he could understand what was right. Gus would have known. *What do you want me to do, Gus? What?*

"Did he ever discuss his investigations with you?" Mr. Warren repeated.

"Sometimes. Yes."

"Did he ever, on any occasion, discuss the activities of any man in this room?"

Carl did not let his eyes move. He could not look at Nick or the hoods sitting behind him. Carl stared at the floor. "Yes," he said softly.

"Did your brother, Police Investigator Gus Polcyn, ever discuss the activities of the defendant in your presence?"

Carl looked from the floor into the urgent eyes of Mr. Warren. He didn't know what he was asking. He didn't know that the mob had warned him. And Gus was dead. What good could he do now? Carl rubbed his face nervously. "Yes," he said, "he talked about Nick Chetizky."

A whisper moved over the courtroom. It was getting late. Carl was in. If he said any more, he'd

be on Nick's list. Why had he always been so alone? Why was he fingered to be the one? All his life he had moved from one place to another, nobody really wanting him, just fulfilling an obligation until they tired even of that and had him sent to the orphanage. Only Gus really cared and it was Gus who had been there to advise him for those few short years. What would Gus want now? Gus knew the mob, knew their ruthlessness, their cool indifference to life. If you got in the way of the mob, you were removed. But that day . . . Gus had told him who had done it. Why? He knew that the mob would converge on Carl. But he said it anyway.

It must have been important. Why else would Gus tell him? Gus must have thought about it, must have known that he, Carl, had to finish his work. Carl let his face turn to Nick's table. The faint smile was gone now and Nick's jaws were set like a steel trap. Nick's expression was a written guarantee for a bloody death if he said any more.

Carl felt a surge of resentment, almost hatred for the pale faced man in the nicely tailored suit. Carl had been shoved around. All his life he'd been pushed and shoved and all his life he had taken it. Now he was through. The anger moved through his body like steam. He turned to the prosecuting attorney.

"Could you tell the court what information he gave about Nick Chetizky?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead, please."

"Gus said he had been looking for the top man that managed the mob. He said that the mob was operating a vice ring with a bunch of imported girls and if things got hot for a girl, the mob shifted them out of town. Later Gus said that he had found the guy that was behind it. The big man. That's what he said. Nick Chetizky."

"Did Gus specifically identify Nick Chetizky?"

"He did. He said that Nick Chetizky was the boss. He said they had just about all they needed on Nick and that the vice squad was getting ready to shut the mob down for good."

"When was this? The date?"

"It was Tuesday, November third. Gus had come in and talked about it. He said they were going to nab Nick's outfit within a week."

"When was your brother killed?"

Carl felt a knot in his throat. His face was hot, his eyes burning. He took a few moments to get his bearings. "Gus was killed November fifth, about eight o'clock in the evening. It happened out in front of the porch where we lived."

"Did you see the killing?"

"Yes."

"Where were you?"

"I was sitting on the porch. I saw Gus coming down the street and I was watching him. I remember I was going to tell him that I had made the basketball squad. It was important to Gus. He wanted me to be stronger."

Carl paused, remembering the tall, very erect figure of his brother in the semi-darkness moving toward the porch.

"Go on, please."

"I waved to him and he waved back and then I saw this car swing around the corner going slow. I didn't pay much attention, but I do remember that the car pulled up near the curb and when Gus was right near the porch, I heard a man say something and Gus turned and walked to the car. It had stopped. I figured it was police business or something. Gus leaned against the car and then he jerked back, but when he did, they started shooting."

"Who started shooting?"

"The men in the car. There were five shots. Gus staggered back and fell on the sidewalk. The car drove away fast. I went down there and saw that Gus was ruined. I yelled for help, but Gus grabbed my arm. He . . . he couldn't see me because they had shot away his face so bad. But he could still talk. He told me who shot him."

Carl rubbed his face clumsily with his hands. The courtroom was hushed in expectant silence.

"What did Gus Polcyn say to you?"

"He said, 'It was Nick Chetizky.'" Carl could hear his own breathing.

"Is that all he said?"

"No, he said it again. Then he asked me if I understood. I told him I did."

"Did he say anything else?"

"No. For a few seconds he ran his fingers along my face. He couldn't see anything, I guess. Then his hand fell away. He was dead."

Carl closed his eyes for a moment because it seemed he could still feel the fingers of his brother's hand moving over his face an instant before death.

"Thank you," Mr. Warren said, then turning to the table of the defendant, he nodded, "Your witness."

Nick Chetizky listened to his lawyer, set his jaws tightly and leaned back in the chair.

"No questions," the lawyer said.

Mr. Warren gestured to Carl. "That will be all."

Carl stood, noticing the weakness in his legs. He glanced at Nick Chetizky. Nick's thick mouth was stretched into a strange smile. Carl sat back down.

"I have something else to say," he said.

Mr. Warren glanced at the judge. "Does it pertain to the case?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

"After they buried my brother, the newspapers wanted to know who did it. But the police told me not to say anything. I didn't tell the reporters I knew who did it, but they got the idea. I guess the word leaked out. So last night I was at the flat when this call came in. Mrs. Heifetz answered the phone. It's a pay phone down the hall for everybody. It was about ten. She called me and I an-

swered it. A man said if I testified today that they would kill me. That's what the man said. He said if I came up and testified they would get me. You can ask Mrs. Heifetz if I didn't get the call. After the man said that, he hung up."

Nick Chetizky's face was contorted in anger. His eyes glowed, dark and menacing.

All his life Carl had been afraid. He had been afraid that his aunt would not keep him, did not want him. He was afraid when his brother went into service in Korea that he would not make it back. He was afraid he would never leave the orphanage. When they killed his brother, they had left him alone. And now they would get him too. No matter what happened at the trial, he was fingered, and some day one of Nick's boys would drive up beside him and empty an automatic in his face. He had lived a lifetime of fear. That fear had become an overpowering force until now, in memory of his dead brother, he had sealed his own doom. But as he stood to leave the witness stand, Carl Polcyn knew that the fear had run its course. Now it didn't matter. There was the inescapable fact that he would die; some day they would find him, and he could bear no more fear.

He set his eyes on thick-faced Nick Chetizky. He felt his steps becoming steady as he left the stand and walked toward the table occupied by the defendant. He felt the looseness in his hands, felt power growing out of a dead fear.

Nick's face peered up at him, a face cultured with a lifetime of cruelty and hatred. Carl let his eyes move over the soft weave of Nick's blue suit and the expensive tie and he remembered how gaudy he looked in his brother's green stripe, a suit his brother had not worn often because he spent his time searching through the filth of the city in a police uniform, searching out the scum. For that he got a face so terribly ruined that the coffin remained closed at the funeral, and a simple grave provided by the city.

Carl Polcyn thought of his wrinkled striped tie, the few pairs of socks and the service revolver in the drawer. He paused at the table and faced his brother's killer. Then he moved. Quickly his hand slid through the lapels of the coat and he felt the butt of the revolver. He drew the gun, seeing the shocked expression of fear cut across Nick's face. He pulled the trigger and felt the gun leap in his hand and Nick's pale face became suddenly bright with flowing blood.

He squeezed the trigger four more times, leaning over the table only a few inches away from the falling figure. The trigger snapped on an empty chamber and very slowly the smoke from the revolver drifted away. Carl saw, slumped in the chair, the blood-stained blue suit, heard the desperate sucking sounds as the man struggled for breath. Nick's hand came up to his own face for an instant as blood spurted from his thick lips. Carl watched the hand fall limply, the head sag lifelessly.

The district attorney touched his arm. Carl turned and handed him the revolver. A silence spread over the courtroom. The members of the jury leaned forward, aware that they were not needed now, that an irrevocable decision had already been made. The judge was standing, his mouth drooped in surprise, and the spectators slowly appeared from behind the seats they had used as hiding places.

Carl smiled. "I'm not afraid of the mob any more," he said.

Whatever they do, I'm not afraid."

Comes Naturally

In Toronto, James Milne, 35, was arrested for public intoxication. In court, he told Judge Harry Donley that he couldn't help his rock 'n' roll walk. He explained that he had served five years in the Navy. "I have a bit of a roll when I walk. My toes turn out. One foot rocks one way while the other rocks the other way."

The charge was dismissed.

Three Strikes—and Out

Delbert Knott, of Cincinnati, O., had triple trouble when he joined his team in a softball game at nearby Newport, Ky. During the game his station wagon was stolen. In the car was his wallet, containing $400, and most of the money belonged to his boss. Moreover, he had left his suit in the car when he changed to his playing clothes. To climax the ill-fated afternoon, his team lost the game.

THE LIGHT was soft back deep in the park. Morey could see the lights over on Bay Street, little white pinpoints. They filtered through the trees, the shrubs and bushes of the park seeming to reach up and ease the glare. A shiver of anticipation ran through Morey as he took a deep drag from the cigarette Frankie had given him. He looked at the dark figures that huddled about him and he smiled. *I'm one of them now*, Morey thought, *I don't have to be scared of Frankie or Red Eye or any of them.*

Morey's spirits soared as he took another drag on the reefer. The smoke was harsh and he began to cough.

"Shut up! They'll be along in a minute!" Frankie growled.

From beyond a turn in the path, around a clump of palmettos, came the sound of slow footsteps. In the dim light two figures appeared slowly walking arm in arm. They moved to a bench across the path and sat down.

"Now!" Frankie whispered. At the signal eight heads appeared from the bushes. The two on the bench saw them and Morey heard the girl take a quick, frightened breath. Morey's heart thudded rapidly and his mouth was suddenly dry as the gang walked casually along the path toward the

Morey wanted to help the gang. If he didn't help them, Morey was going to die . . .

FIRST NIGHTER

by
RICHARD HARDWICK

bench. Directly before the bench, they stopped. No one looked at the couple sitting there.

"Must be nice to have a broad out in the park, huh?" Frankie said to the seven guys. "What would you do if you had one, Red Eye?"

Red Eye's answer drew laughter from the gang. Morey felt the laughter bubbling up uncontrollably from his stomach. It wasn't so much what Red Eye said, it was knowing how the dumb jerk on the bench felt—scared, trembling—and knowing that he, Morey, never had to feel that way again. He was one of *them* now.

Frankie made another crack and the laughing started again. The boy slowly got up from the bench and took the girl's arm. Out of the corner of his eye Morey could see her face in the pale light. She was pretty. He could see her breasts rising and falling.

The guy was standing now. He was taller than Morey had thought and a little of the old scared feeling came back. *I'm not scared! He's the one that better be scared. I'm one of the gang now!* Morey fumbled in his shirt pocket for another of the reefers. He pursed his lips over it and, lighting it, took a deep drag. His nerve steadied as the smoke filled his chest.

Frankie was talking again. Morey heard him say something dirty and the gang laughed. Morey tried to exhale the smoke before he laughed but somehow he couldn't. The smoke hurt coming out in a laugh and he began to cough. When he finally stopped he saw that the tall guy and the girl were starting to walk away toward Bay Street.

The gang quickly moved out in a line, Frankie in the center and Morey on the right end. They all looked directly at the tall guy. Frankie said something and made an obscene gesture. Morey knew how the guy felt. He knew just how it was to be so scared you couldn't move or speak. Then he shifted his gaze to the girl. She was staring at the line, her eyes wide with terror. Suddenly, Morey forgot about everything else. He felt big and powerful and a strange feeling came over him. He knew he was life or death to that girl.

Morey was startled when the tall guy spoke. "What do you want with us?" He looked straight into Frankie's eyes when he said it. Morey tried to think the voice shook, but it didn't. How can he talk so calm? Morey wondered. He's scared to death but he talks calm. Morey remembered when the gang gave him the treatment and how scared he was. He couldn't even open his mouth. But this guy—he asked a question and his voice was deep and even.

Morey took a good look at him. He was tall. Taller than Frankie and he looked stronger. Maybe we picked the wrong guy, Morey thought, a sudden panic spreading over him.

Frankie didn't answer the question and the guy spoke again. "All right, if you don't want nothing with us, move out of our way and let us past."

"Move out of our way!" Red Eye mocked, getting a laugh.

Morey waited for somebody to make the move he knew was coming. But nobody moved and the tall guy, motioning the girl to stand close behind him, started around the end of the line. The line moved over, like a snake, and blocked him.

The guy moved toward the other end—Morey's end—and Morey felt his heart slip up into his throat. He felt as if something were restricting his breathing. The big guy was coming around *his* end and he had to move over to block him.

Suppose the other guys have had enough and leave me here alone with this creep? Morey thought. The tall boy was walking slowly, deliberately, the girl at his back. He came on and Morey felt himself moving sideways on shaky legs. He glanced out of the corner of his eye to see if Frankie and the others were keeping the line closed. It seemed to Morey that they were not close enough. The tall guy seemed to be getting bigger.

Morey wanted to say something smart; something that'd make even Frankie laugh. He wanted to say something to this creep that everybody would talk about later on. *Remember what Morey said when that big jerk walked up to him?* And then everybody'd look over at Morey and say to themselves: *Why didn't I think of that.*

But it wasn't like that at all. Standing there in the almost black night, Morey had lost his voice.

"You punks move out of my way!" the tall boy looked squarely at Morey.

Morey's mind raced, like a car with a burnt-out clutch. Why didn't Frankie do something? Then, suddenly, Morey's voice came to life. It amazed even Morey because it came out without his consent. It screamed: "You big bastard, what are you going to do!"

There was a clicking sound, as if punctuating the sudden outburst, and something in the tall boy's hand caught a stray ray of light, reflecting it dully into Morey's eyes. *Switchblade!* The word formed on Morey's lips and he tried desperately to fling himself aside. The long blade caught him just below the ribs and he heard himself screaming as the knife sliced across and slipped out. His legs wouldn't move and he felt himself falling.

He was on his knees, his hands clutched to his middle. "Fra—Frankie!" But Frankie and the others were vague shadows bobbing away in the darkness —running feet, fading away. Morey felt the asphalt as his face slid along it.

The trees blew a little and he saw the lights from Bay Street. He heard the girl sobbing and Morey was scared, more scared than he had ever been. The girl's sobs were fading and the lights on Bay Street were flickering.

"I ain't scared! I ain't! I'm a big guy . . . I'm . . ."

THE DOUBLES

by
RICHARD DEMING

When Harmon met himself on the street, he knew his troubles were over . . .

It was like looking into a mirror. Wade Harmon stopped with the match folder half withdrawn from his pocket and stared at the face of the man who had asked him for a light. It was his own face. The eyes, the nose, the mouth, the bone structure. There was even an identical small mole on the left cheek.

The stranger stared back at him in equal astonishment. Neither said anything for a few moments, merely looking each other up and down with wondering expressions on their faces. They were the same height and their bodies were equally hard and lean. Their hair was an identical light brown. They even had the same degree of suntan.

Only their clothing distinguished them. Wade Harmon's handmade necktie had probably cost more than the stranger's threadbare suit.

Harmon finished withdrawing the match folder and silently handed it to the man. The stranger lighted his cigarette without taking his eyes from Harmon's face. He handed the folder back and Harmon dropped it into his pocket again.

"I've heard that everybody in the world has an exact double somewhere," Harmon said. "But I never expected to meet my own."

"Rather a shock," the stranger agreed. Even his voice had the same timbre as Harmon's.

Harmon said, "Calls for a drink, doesn't it?"

The other man smiled a little ruefully. "If it's on you. I own exactly one dollar, and I plan to use it for a flop."

They had met near Hollywood and Sunset. Harmon led his double a half block along Hollywood in the direction of Vine until they came to a cocktail lounge. When they ordered highballs, the bartender gazed from one to the other with a mildly intrigued look on his face, but he made no comment on the identical appearance. As it was only seven P.M., there were few other people at the bar. None of them paid any attention to Harmon and his double.

Harmon raised his glass in salute and said, "I'm Wade Harmon."

"Harry Meadows," his new acquaintance said. "Thanks for the drink."

The drink stretched to three as they compared vital statistics and backgrounds in an attempt to find some clue to their remarkable resemblance. They were both thirty-three, with birthdays two weeks apart. They were both five feet eleven and weighed one hundred eighty pounds. They both wore size thirty-nine suits and size eight-and-a-half-B shoes. They held their hands side-by-side on the bar, marvelling at the identically slender fingers and exact shapes of the back.

Harmon asked, "Where were you born?"

"East St. Louis."

Harmon shook his head. "No relatives in the midwest, so we can't be distantly related. All my ancestors were New Yorkers. Have any college?"

"Two years at Illinois U. I flunked out."

Harmon raised his eyebrows. "Even our characters—or lack of them—must be alike. I flunked out of Cornell after two years."

Further exchange of background material disclosed that their lives since college had been equally aimless, the only large difference being that Wade Harmon had the cushion of enough inherited money to be able to afford idleness. Harry Meadows self-mockingly described himself as an upper-class bum.

It was over the third drink that Wade Harmon got the idea of making use of the resemblance between himself and Harry Meadows. Giving his double a speculative look, he said, "You in the market for a job?"

Meadows shrugged. "An easy one, maybe. I told you my last dollar goes for a flop tonight."

"Particular about the sort of work you do?"

It was Harry Meadow's turn to look speculative. "Not if it's easy enough. I'm not very particular about its ethics."

Wade Harmon said, "Let's take a taxi over to my hotel and talk things over. Maybe I can put you in line to make a considerable amount of money."

Harmon was staying at the Beverly-Hilton. When they reached the room, Harry Meadows glanced around enviously at the rich furnishings, then walked out on the balcony and stared down at the lighted swimming pool five stories below. When he stepped back inside, Harmon was getting ice cubes from a refrigerator which had been concealed by a sliding panel.

"You must be a rich man to afford this place," Meadows remarked as his host began to mix drinks.

"I don't live here," Harmon said. "I'm just vacationing in Los Angeles for a week. I live in New York." He poured mix on top of whisky and laughed. "I'm vacationing somewhere most of the time."

"Then you must be rich."

Harmon shook his head. "As a matter of fact, I'm not. I have a pretty good income from a trust fund, but it all goes for expenses. I haven't a dime in reserve."

After both had sampled their drinks, Harmon said, "Ever had any trouble with the law?"

Harry Meadows gave him a quizzical look. "Never enough to get my fingerprints on file. Why?"

"You mentioned you weren't very particular about ethics."

Meadows shrugged. "I keep my nose clean. You couldn't hire me to kill anybody for less than a million dollars. I might do it then. But if it's safe, and pays enough, I'll do most anything."

"It's safe," Harmon assured him. "For you, anyway. There'd be a little risk for me. The pay is ten thousand dollars plus a vacation trip to Europe."

Meadows's eyebrows went up. He took another contemplative sip of his drink. "Legal?"

"Your part of it," Harmon said. He paused. "Well, I'm not exactly sure it's legal. There's probably some law against traveling on another's passport. But even if you were caught, the consequences could hardly be serious. And you won't be caught."

"Uh-huh," Meadows said. "You want me to impersonate you on a European trip."

"If we come to terms."

Meadows pursed his lips. "They put fingerprints on passports. Suppose some foreign customs agent decided to check my prints against the passport?"

"That's easy," Harmon said. "I've never been overseas. You'll apply for the passport in my name, so your prints will be on it. Actually you won't even be guilty of using another's passport. You'll just be guilty of traveling under an assumed name."

Meadows nodded. "I like that better. What's the deal?"

"I want to know a little more about you before I say. Willing to answer some questions?"

"What can I lose?" Meadows asked with a shrug. "Shoot."

For the next hour Wade Harmon plied his double with questions about his personal life, all of which Meadows readily answered. Harmon satisfied himself that his double had no family, and no close friends who might inquire about his whereabouts if he disappeared for a while. The man seemed to be a drifting soldier of fortune, rootless and with no goal in life other than making his way with a minimum amount of effort. He cheerfully admitted he had never held a job for more than a few weeks at a time, and that he had even avoided military service by never registering. He also admitted that he had never filed an income tax return.

It was almost too good to be true, Harmon thought. Apparently Harry Meadows, fingerprints weren't on file anywhere, and even his name wasn't listed on any official records. If he disappeared permanently after Harmon had made use of him, the probability was that no one would ever start a search for him.

When he was satisfied that he had a complete picture of his double's background, Harmon said, "On the subject of ethics. Suppose you suspected you had been an unwitting accessory to a felony? Just suspected, not knew. And you didn't even suspect until it was all over. Would you feel it necessary to report your suspicion to the police?"

Meadows asked, "Would I be in a position to establish I didn't know in advance what was going to happen?"

"Let's put it this way. I will state to you now that the reason I want you to impersonate me on a European trip is that I want a certain man to believe I am in Europe while his wife is vacationing in Florida. At some future time you may suspect that isn't the real reason I hired you. But the police would never be able to prove you thought any different when you accepted my offer."

"Then my conscience wouldn't bother me," Meadows said dryly. "Not with ten thousand dollars to salve it."

Wade Harmon smiled to himself. The real payoff wasn't going to be ten thousand dollars. He had no intention of leaving a man alive who would be in a position to blackmail him for the rest of his life. Not after he had served his purpose.

"Then we have a deal," he said. He walked over to the dresser and took out a freshly-laundered shirt. "I want you to try on some of my clothes to see how they fit."

Ten minutes later Harry Meadows was completely dressed in a set of Wade Harmon's clothing. It fit perfectly, from the shoes to the sport coat and slacks. They stood side-by-side in front of the full-length mirror on the bathroom door and examined their twin reflections.

"It'll work like a charm," Harmon said finally. "Even my wife wouldn't guess you weren't me."

Harry Meadows looked startled. "You have a wife?"

Harmon grinned at him. "Don't worry about it. You won't be called on for any marital duties, because Helen and I don't get along. On paper we still live together, but I see her as little as possible, and she avoids me just as hard. You'll take this trip by yourself. It won't even be necessary for you to meet my wife."

Meadows's expression turned relieved. "Won't I have to meet any of your friends?"

"Oh yes. I want you to look a number of them up in Europe. Everybody in my so-called set but me is crazy about Europe. I prefer the states, and I've never had the slightest desire to see any other country. But there'll be some friend or other of mine in every major city you visit. I'll brief you before you leave on who they are, and where you can expect to run into them. I'll want you to look all of them up, so that there won't be any question at some later date about my actually having been in Europe."

"I see," Meadows said. "When will this trip take place?"

"Probably in about a month. I'll fly back to New York tomorrow. I'll advance you enough money to follow on a later flight. There's a small hotel on eastside Manhattan called the Hotel Gavin. Register there under your own name, and I'll look you up as soon as I'm ready for you."

"When will that be?"

"Soon after you get settled," Harmon said. "You'll have a lot of memorizing to do before you take off. I'll bring you pictures of all the people I want you to look up in Europe, and brief you on their backgrounds and their relationships with me, so that you'll be able to bluff your way through when you meet them. You'll also have to learn to reproduce my signature. So that you can sign traveler's checks."

Meadows looked dubious. "People examine the signatures on traveler's checks pretty closely."

"That's simple," Harmon said. "I'll furnish you cash and let you buy the checks yourself in my name. Then there can't be any question about the signatures when you cash them."

"Probably better," Meadows agreed. "My signature will be on the passport too, and somebody might want to check that against the checks."

"That's another thing," Harmon told him. "We'll have to switch identities temporarily the day you apply for the passport, and again the day you pick it up. I'll just stay in your room on both occasions. It may be some time after that before you're ready to take off, so we won't make the permanent switch until you have to leave for the airport."

Meadows nodded. "Aside from looking up a few of your friends, what am I supposed to do in

Europe as a dodge?"

"Just vacation. I won't know the route I want you to follow until I've discovered which of my friends plan to be in Europe and where. I'll give you your itinerary and what people to look up before you leave. I also want you to cable my lawyer your new hotel address every time you move from one city to another."

Meadows nodded again. "I take it the purpose of all this is to build you an unbreakable alibi, isn't it?"

Wade Harmon looked at him. "I told you the purpose was to convince a man I was in Europe during the time his wife was vacationing in Florida. If you don't want to be an accessory, let's leave it at that."

"All right," Meadows said agreeably. "When do we switch back to our real selves again?"

"As soon as you land back in the States. Sometime during your tour, you'll get a cable either from my lawyer or my wife informing you of an event which will require your presence home immediately. You'll arrange to fly back at once. There isn't a chance in the world that my wife will bother to meet you at the airport. You'll have a taxi take you from the airport to a place I'll show you before you leave for Europe. I'll meet you there and pay you your ten thousand dollars. Then I'll proceed on home as though I was just coming from the airport."

"You say the cable may come from your wife?"

"Either from her or my lawyer. Why?"

Harry Meadows grinned. "Nothing. Just invalidates a guess I was making."

"What guess was that?"

"That it was your wife you were planning to kill."

Three days later the two men met again in the room Harry Meadows had engaged at the Hotel Gavin on eastside Manhattan. Wade Harmon brought along a slim package of snapshots and briefed his double on who each pictured person was, and what their relationships to him were. He also handed him a sheet of paper on which were written the names of each person appearing in the snapshots. Opposite each name appeared a hotel name, the name of a city and two dates.

"These are the inclusive dates each person listed will be staying at the hotel indicated," he said. "You'll notice that most of them are either London, Paris or Rome. You'll have to be in those cities during the proper periods."

Then he drew an eight-by-ten portrait photograph from a manila envelope and showed it to Meadows. The subject was a lovely-featured brunette with a still, unsmiling face and sultry eyes.

"My wife, Helen," Harmon said. "You'll probably never meet her, but you'd better know what she looks like in case any of my friends bring her into the conversation. Wouldn't do to give anyone the impression you thought she was a blonde, for instance, if she's not."

Later he drove Meadows down to the waterfront area to show him the place they would meet when Meadows returned from Europe. It was a deserted warehouse once owned by Harmon's father, and still a part of the estate held in trust for Wade Harmon.

"I'll just stay on in your room at the hotel when we switch identities," Harmon explained. "You can cable me there in your name before you start back, giving your expected time of arrival, so I'll be able to meet you here."

Harry Meadows didn't question why it was necessary to meet in such an out-of-the-way spot to switch back identities, when it would be just as simple to switch them in the hotel room. And Harmon didn't think it necessary to tell him he preferred an isolated spot because he had no intention of paying his double ten thousand dollars.

He planned to pay for his services with a bullet.

Plans for the European trip went off without a hitch. Two weeks later Harry Meadows had memorized the names and backgrounds of the half dozen friends of Harmon's he was expected to look up in Europe, he had practiced Harmon's signature until he could sign it without hesitation, he had his passport, his traveler's checks and his plane reservation.

Four days after that Wade Harmon said good-by to his wife and climbed into a taxi. He had the driver take him to the Hotel Gavin, left his suitcases in the car and told the driver to wait. Ten minutes later a man of identical appearance and dress came out of the hotel and climbed into the cab.

"International Airport," he said.

Wade Harmon took no action for a full two weeks after Harry Meadows had departed for Europe under his name. He spent most of his time sitting in the hotel room, where he was now living as Harry Meadows, putting the final touches to his murder plan.

Wade Harmon had contemplated murdering his Uncle Gerald Harmon for a dozen years, ever since he had reached twenty-one and was eligible to inherit the three million dollars principal his father had left in trust for him during the lifetime of Wade's Uncle Gerald. The terms of the will allowed Wade only half income from the estate as long as Gerald Harmon lived. The other half went to his father's brother, who was also custodian of the trust fund. On his uncle's death, the whole thing would fall to Wade.

Gerald Harmon was almost disgustingly healthy. At sixty-five he seemed destined to live at least another twenty years. Unless he met a violent end.

The trouble was that Wade Harmon had never been able to devise a safe murder plan prior to the time he met Harry Meadows. The old man was not only disgustingly healthy, he was disgustingly well-

liked. No one in the world aside from Wade Harmon had a motive for wanting him dead, a matter which would certainly occur to the police if he were murdered.

However, it could hardly occur to them if Wade Harmon was three thousand miles away across an ocean when Gerald Harmon died.

At the end of two weeks Harmon decided his double had now been in Europe long enough to give him a solid alibi. At nine P.M. on a Monday night he left the hotel and took a subway up into the eighty-seven hundreds, where his Uncle Gerald maintained a bachelor apartment. At a quarter of ten he opened the apartment house's outer door by sliding a thin strip of celluloid into the crack between the door and the frame, forcing the spring lock's bolt back into its housing. Then he quietly climbed the stairs to the second floor.

He stood with his ear pressed to the door of his uncle's apartment for five minutes to make sure he didn't have company. When he heard no sound at all from inside, he wrapped his index finger in his handkerchief and pressed the doorbell button.

Gerald Harmon looked at his nephew in astonishment when he opened the door. He was a broad, portly man with a good-natured face somewhat resembling that of Jiggs in the comic strip, *Bringing Up Father*. He wore slippers and a robe, but he hadn't been in bed, because trousers showed beneath the hem of the robe.

"Wade, my boy," he said heartily. "Come on in. I thought you were in Europe."

Harmon said easily. "Just got back tonight."

He moved into the front room and shut the door behind him. "Anybody else here?" he asked.

His Uncle Gerald shook his head. "At this time of night? I was just going to go to bed. Have a drink?"

He started toward the kitchen without waiting for an answer. Harmon moved quietly behind him, taking the gun from his pocket as he did.

"How's Helen?" the older man asked over his shoulder. "She come back with you?"

The gun was descending as he finished the question. With his head half turned over his shoulder, the old man caught a glimpse of it from the corners of his eyes. He didn't even have time to register astonishment, though, before the barrel struck the top of his head with a sickening crunch. He dropped instantly.

Wade Harmon stared down at him. The single blow had been enough, he saw. He had brought the gun down with all the force he could muster, and it had broken right through the skull.

Drawing on a pair of gloves, Harmon quickly went through the apartment, pulling out drawers and dumping them on the floor. From a wallet on the dresser he took fifty-four dollars. Then he stripped the wrist watch and a Masonic ring from the corpse.

Ten minutes after he had entered, he left the apartment again. He left the door wide open, wanting the body to be discovered as soon as possible. Twenty minutes later he tossed the watch and ring into the Hudson River. An hour after that he was back at the Hotel Gavin and in bed.

In his mind he tried to work out the time schedule of future events. Some passing tenant may already have glanced in the open door of Gerald Harmon's apartment and discovered the corpse. At the latest it should be discovered in the morning. The news should get to Helen by noon, and to Wade Harmon's lawyer by late afternoon at least. Probably a night cable briefly stating that Uncle Gerald had died suddenly and giving funeral plans would go out that evening addressed to Wade Harmon at whatever hotel in Europe Harry Meadows was staying at at the moment. Within forty-eight hours Harry Meadows should be winging back toward New York.

Just before he went to sleep, Harmon wondered for the first time what his uncle had meant by his question about Helen coming back from Europe with him. It had been a silly question, because his Uncle Gerald certainly had known he never took his wife vacationing with him.

Two days later a cablegram addressed to Harry Meadows arrived from London. It was signed simply 'Wade', and said he would arrive at International Airport on TWA flight 861 at 6:45 A.M. the following morning.

Harmon breathed a sigh of satisfaction. He hadn't been particularly worried about his wife upsetting plans by meeting the plane anyway, but now he knew she wouldn't. Helen wouldn't get up in time to meet even a lover at that hour, let alone a husband she didn't particularly care for.

Everything seemed to be working beautifully. The newspaper reports of the death of Gerald Harmon attributed it to a prowler he had surprised in the act. Obviously Wade Harmon wasn't even going to be the subject of routine suspicion, since the same reports said that the murdered man's closest relative, his nephew Wade Harmon, was vacationing in Europe.

There was one slight inaccuracy in the news reports. They all said that he was vacationing in the company of his wife.

At six the next morning Harmon phoned the airport and learned that flight 861 was expected to arrive on time. At seven he reached the warehouse and settled himself to wait. He didn't expect Meadows to be able to make it from the airport before nearly nine, but he wanted to be certain to be there when his double arrived.

At ten of nine the door from the street opened and Harry Meadows came in carrying a suitcase in either hand. He set them on the floor and smiled at Harmon.

Harmon gripped the gun in his pocket and smiled back. "Any trouble?" he asked.

Meadows pursed his lips. "I wouldn't exactly call it trouble," he said. "There's been an interesting development. Let's get back away from the door to talk. Someone outside might hear us."

He moved past Harmon, who turned to keep facing him as he passed. Meadows continued on toward the rear wall. After watching him for a moment, Harmon followed. He stopped six feet away from Meadows, who had turned to face him when he reached the wall. Harmon still gripped his gun, but he decided not to bring it out until he heard what Meadows meant by a "development."

Meadows said, "Helen made a spur-of-the-moment decision to see Europe too. She joined me in Paris three days after I arrived."

Harmon felt his stomach turn over. "Good God!"

Meadows smiled reassuringly. "I don't think she'd ever have suspected I wasn't you, if I hadn't gotten foolish. I gather you haven't had much of a marital relationship for some years, so she probably wouldn't have thought it strange if I hadn't even kissed her hello. But she's a damned attractive woman, and I couldn't resist the opportunity."

"You—" Harmon said faintly. "You tried to make love to her?"

"Succeeded," Meadows said cheerfully. "How could I fail? She thought I was her husband." He added in a reminiscent tone, "At first."

"At first?" Harmon repeated on a high note.

Meadows smiled again. "I think I could fool anyone else in the world. But you can't fool a woman on a thing like that. She knew almost instantly." He shrugged. "There wasn't anything to do but confess the whole plot."

Harmon relaxed the grip on his gun. "Good God!" he said again.

"It's all right," Meadows said. "Once she got over the initial shock, she began to like me. Quite a lot. She's been thinking for some time of leaving you anyway. She much prefers me."

"Wha—what?"

In a companionable tone Meadows explained, "With Helen to guide me over the bumps, there's no reason I can't go on being Wade Harmon forever. She's willing, and so am I. I can even prove I'm Wade Harmon. Neither of us has ever been arrested or been in military service, so neither of us has fingerprints on file anywhere except in the Passport Bureau. And those prove that I'm Wade Harmon."

Harmon stared at him, stunned.

"Of course it was pretty obvious you picked this place because you meant to kill me instead of paying me off," Meadows went on amiably. "But that sort of thing can work both ways. When you're found here with Harry Meadows' identification on you, who's going to question that it wasn't really me who was mysteriously murdered?"

Wade Harmon's fingers began to tighten on the gun in his pocket again.

"Don't bother to try it," Meadows said dryly. "I didn't come back from Europe alone.

"Helen is two feet behind you, with a gun leveled at your backbone."

Cart Before the Horse

In Clifton, N. J., Michael Kopis was arrested for drunken driving after his car collided with a bus. In court, he explained to Magistrate John Celentano that he was "absolutely sober" when the accident happened. Then he entered a tavern to telephone police, found the phone busy, took several drinks to steady his nerves, and then was examined by a doctor who found evidence of alcohol. The charge was dismissed.

Two Minutes to Go

Richard L. Straight, 17, of Grand Rapids, Mich., had his driver's license suspended for 120 days for "habitual negligence." He asked for permission to drive his car home. At 11 A.M. he was given a special permit good for one hour. At 11:58 A.M. Straight lost control of his car on a curve near his home and smashed into a utility pole. He escaped injury, but was arrested for reckless driving.

Short Changed

In Hammond, Ind., Luther Bloomberg told police he got the short end of a trade deal. Someone stole a new oil heating unit from a home he was building, and left him with a 15-year-old model.

She wore a thin wisp of a bikini that was doing a half-hearted job of containing her full, tip-tilted breasts, a matching V of material was draped precariously high on her hips to converge between her thighs. Instead of concealing, the outfit had the effect of revealing.

Her hair was the color of newly fallen snow, complementing the icy blue of her eyes. Her sun-tanned face, free of any make-up, gleamed in the glaring sunshine, the bright red gash of her lips split occasionally to reveal the sparkling white of her teeth.

Johnny Liddell lounged in the chair alongside the pool, idly watched the effortless flow of her muscles as she worked her way down to him. Several times during her trip down the length of the pool she stopped to exchange a few words with some of the guests. Some he recognized from the regular appearances of their faces in movie magazines and Sunday supplements, some were more familiar to him from mugg shots in the various police files.

It was a typical Hollywood party.

Lydia Johnson was this year's Marilyn Monroe

Liddell's client was a beautiful, blonde movie star. That was why Liddell wanted to be three thousand miles away from her.

DEAD SET

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

by FRANK KANE

—a few years ago completely unknown, this year, by the alchemy of constant publicity, a sensation. The movie magazine that had failed to adorn its cover with her likeness during the past year was as rare as a war novel without four letter words. The tilt of her breast was more familiar to the average American male than the name of the Secretary of State.

And she was in trouble.

Liddell waited until she had traversed the entire length of the pool to where he sprawled, then swung his legs off the chair so she could sit down. From close, she smelled almost as good as she looked.

"Having fun?"

"That is what I'm here for." Liddell brought a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his beach robe, shook two loose. He offered one to the girl, waited until she had fitted it between her lips and touched a match to it.

She took a long drag. The smoke dribbled from between half-parted lips. "Partly. But mostly because I need your help. I'm being blackmailed, Liddell, and I'm pretty sure the people behind it are here today." Her eyes finished their circuit of the pool, came back to his. "Meet me in the library in about twenty minutes. I'll tell you all about it."

Liddell lit his cigarette, blew the smoke upward in a feathery tendril. "Any idea which one in this mob scene is the heavy?"

The snow-top replaced the fixed smile on her face, shook her head prettily. "Ideas, no proof. I can't talk about it any more right now. I'll see you inside." She took a last drag on the cigarette, ground it out in the tray next to the chair. "In twenty minutes."

Liddell lay back in the chair, watched the easy motion of the blonde's hips from the rear as she finished her tour of the guests.

He stood up, drew his beach robe tighter around his middle, walked down to where a foursome sat under a colored umbrella at a small, pool-side table.

The girls were standard products of the Hollywood glamor mill—blonde, sleek, big-breasted and expensive-looking. The taller of the two men, in an open necked sport shirt and fawn slacks, looked up as Liddell stopped at the table. His long black hair was split in a three-quarter part, slicked back over his head. His eyes were big, brown and liquid, his mouth petulant, with a slightly purple tinge. His eyes narrowed in surprise when he recognized Liddell.

"Look who's here, Angelo," he grunted to his short, paunchier partner. "Liddell. The super snooper."

The man called Angelo rubbed the flat of his palm over the almost hairless pate of his head, scowled at the private detective. "Off your beat, ain't you, shamus? I thought we got rid of you when we shook the dust of 47th and Main off our shoes. What are you doing out here?"

Uninvited, Liddell pulled a chair from an adjoining table, dropped into it.

"Sit down," the paunchy man growled; "be my guest."

Liddell grinned at him and helped himself to a cigarette from the pack on the table. "So this is where you boys holed up after you left town?"

"Holed up?" Angelo growled. "What kind of holed up? Me and the kid here, we figure business is moving west so we move with it." He turned to the girls. "You kids run along for a few minutes. We got a lot of old times to talk over with the shamus here."

With obvious appreciation, he watched the rear view as the girls scampered toward the bar at the far end of the pool and returned his attention to Liddell with reluctance.

"One thing I got to say for you, shamus. You travel first class. This Lydia Johnson broad, this is nothing but the best. This year."

Liddell nodded. "A nice piece of goods," he conceded. "She sure came up in a hurry. Who's behind her?"

Angelo shrugged his shoulders, looked to the moist eyed man on his left. "You hear something about someone being behind the Snow Top, Marty?" When the sleek-haired man pursed his lips, shook his head, Angelo turned back to Liddell. "We don't hear nothing about this, Liddell. So maybe nobody's behind her. The broad's got talent sticking out all over her. You can see that. No?" He exposed dingy teeth in a lewd smile. "Real talent."

Liddell's eyes hopscotched around the pool. "I see a few of the other boys around. Eddie Match, Leo Sullivan. Sort of an Old Home Week?"

Angelo swabbed at the light film of perspiration on his forehead with the back of a hairy hand. "Like I said, shamus, all the action is out here these days. The Big Town's got nothing left for a guy who likes to live good. This is the life—plenty broads, plenty sunshine. A man gets used to living like this real easy. Right, Marty?"

Marty bobbed his head obediently. "Right, Ange."

He broke off at a signal from Marty, turned to greet an overdressed female of indeterminate age who was flouncing from table to table. When she approached their table, it was evident that a heavy make-up job was fighting a losing battle with wrinkles and crow's feet.

"Angelo, I just wanted to tell you we dropped by your place in the Valley last night. Divine, my dear, absolutely divine. Catch my 11:15 broadcast tonight, I'm sure you'll be delighted with what I have to say about it." She eyed Liddell curiously. "Another of your colleagues? I can see he's from back East by his complexion."

"Just a character I knew in the Big Town, Laura. Liddell make the acquaintance of Miss St. Clair. What she don't know about this town ain't worth

knowing. Ain't that right, Marty?"

Marty went through the necessary head-bobbing motions.

"I've heard your broadcasts and I've read your columns, Miss St. Clair," Liddell told her. "I'm glad to meet you."

"Angelo, you disappoint me," the faded woman scolded. "Here I thought all your friends were characters and you spring a straight man on me. Actually speaks English."

"You meet all kinds," the stocky man grunted. "Besides, Liddell ain't a friend in a strict manner of speaking. He's a shamus I used to run into back East once in awhile."

The columnist's eyes were alive and interested behind the enamelled facade of her make-up. "A shamus? That's a private detective, isn't it?" She dropped her voice, lowered her face conspiratorially. "Have you got something juicy for Laura, Mr. Liddell? The boys will tell you I always protect a source—and I pay well for exclusives."

Liddell shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not working. Just taking a breather before going back East. I haven't been doing anything more glamorous than tracking down a movie-struck kid—"

The columnist's eyes narrowed. "But you rated an invitation to a Lydia Johnson party. Possibly you knew her before she became a star? Tell me, Liddell, is it true that—"

Liddell took a last drag on his cigarette, made a production of crushing it out. "As a matter of fact, I just happened to meet her through a mutual friend. She mentioned the party and it sounded like a nice way to kill an afternoon."

The columnist managed to look miffed. "Possibly you think it's none of my business?" Before Liddell could answer, she snapped, "Everything that happens in this town is my business. If you did have anything on the fire, or if you hope to do any business in this town, you might find it worthwhile to cooperate with Laura." Her eyes flicked to the other two at the table and back. "Most people do." She nodded to Angelo and Marty, flounced on to the next table.

"You used to get along good with the press," Marty grinned, when the woman was out of earshot. "You're sure losing your touch."

"A dame like that's not the press. She's a walking scandal factory." He checked his wristwatch. "I know it will break you all up, but I'm going to have to tear myself away."

"I'll live," Angelo grunted.

Liddell skirted the other tables that lined the pool, headed for the portable bar at the end. He ordered a Smirnoff and tonic, watched while the man in the white jacket made a big deal of tilting the vodka bottle over the ice cubes. Back at the table he had just left, Angelo and Marty had their heads together. Angelo was doing most of the talking, Marty's head bobbing in agreement.

The private detective finished his drink, set the glass down on the bar, wandered toward a set of french windows that led into a small playroom. The air in here was cool, fragrant. He crossed the playroom to a door that opened on a larger room that was half library, half den.

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Lydia Johnson had draped a chenille robe around her, sat huddled in a comfortable looking overstuffed library chair. She had a tall drink in her hand that clinked when she waved to Liddell.

"Close the door so we won't be disturbed." When he had swung the door shut behind him, she waved to the built-in bar. "Help yourself."

"Met a couple of old friends while I was waiting," he told her while he spilled some Smirnoff into a glass, dumped in some ice and washed it down with tonic. "Angelo Russo and his yes-man Marty. They introduced me to a she-vulture named Laura St. Clair."

"That woman gives me the willies. Always prying."

Liddell took his drink, crossed the room to a chair facing her. "A couple of other guests interested me. Eddie Match and Leo Sullivan. Quite a select crew."

The blonde shrugged. "Everybody out here knows Angelo. He runs one of the best gambling traps out here. Everybody who counts gives the place a big play." She swirled the liquid around in her glass. "Eddie Match is a big agent out here these days. Didn't you know that?"

Liddell grunted. "The only thing I ever heard of Match agenting was a stag or a smoker."

"He still peddles flesh, but he gets paid better for it these days." She ran her fingers through her hair, brushed it back from her forehead. "Liddell, I'm going to lay all the cards on the table. Back before I hit the big time, I did some work for Eddie Match."

Liddell took a deep sip from his glass, waited.

"Now that I'm on top, it's popped up to louse me up. Bad."

"What is it? Pictures?"

The blonde got up, walked to the desk, took a key from the top drawer. She moved back an oil painting, revealing a wall safe. She used the key, opened the safe, dug into its interior. When she turned around she had two envelopes in her hand. She walked over, tossed them into Liddell's lap.

"You'll have to remember that I was just a kid. And hungry." She walked to the window, pulled back the drape and stared out across the well kept lawn while he opened the first envelope.

It was a manuscript titled "When Lydia Johnson

Was a Call Girl—She Was the 'Specialty' of the House." Liddell skimmed through the article, growled deep in his throat.

"They want you to pay off on this? They're nuts. Nobody would touch this thing with a six-foot pole."

"You'd better take a look at the art to illustrate it. In the other envelope." She didn't turn from the window.

Liddell dumped a batch of 4 x 5 prints from the other envelope, flipped through them, whistled soundlessly.

"You must have been more than hungry to pose for pix like these. You must have been nuts."

"They weren't posed. We did a show sometimes—they must have been shot then." She let the drape fall back into place, turned around. "All right, they have me cold. I don't know how much they want, they haven't set the figure yet." She picked up a cigarette from the table, stuck it between her lips, smoked with short, angry puffs. "I'll go for the payoff because I have no choice. That's what I need you for, Liddell. I want you to make the payoff. But I want to make sure it's a one-time deal."

Liddell returned the prints to the envelope, read through the article more carefully. "You said you have an idea who's behind this?"

"An idea. No proof." The cigarette dropped from the corner of her mouth when she talked. "Eddie Match booked those shows, and, while he never showed up personally, Leo Sullivan was always front row center."

"Angelo fit in the picture?"

"I think so. I've been taking a good look at those pictures. Don't those decorations in the room look familiar?"

Liddell grinned. "I hadn't noticed. You kept getting in the way."

"Well, I did. I'm positive those pictures were taken in the private room on the third floor of the place Angelo used to run on 47th Street when he was operating in New York."

"Then any one of them could have arranged for the pictures to be taken. Anybody else here at the party?"

The blonde rubbed the outside of her arms as though to massage some warmth into them. "They're the only ones out there that I know have any idea I was a call girl."

Liddell tossed the envelopes on an end table. "I don't know if paying off is a good idea, baby. You can never be sure it's the last installment. There are plenty of ways to pull a double cross."

"I've got to take that chance. If I don't, and that manuscript falls into the hands of a scandal magazine, they'd have a picnic with it. And if they've got those pictures to back it up, I couldn't even open my mouth." She chain-lit a fresh butt, dropped into the chair dispiritedly. "This is no nude calendar or leg art, mister. If this gets out, I'm through for good."

"And if you start paying off, you may be hooked for good. Your only out is for us to find out who has the negatives and any other prints and discourage them."

The blonde licked at her lips. "You think you could?"

"It's worth a try."

The blonde got up from her chair, walked over to where he stood, laid her hand on his arm. "Look, Liddell, I'm not putting on the wronged innocence act. Those are pictures of me and, while I'm not proud of them, I'm not yelling frame. I'm just asking to be let off the hook."

"Don't worry, baby, I'm almost shockproof. Making a living that way isn't an easy way to keep groceries on the table, that's for sure. But it's a much more honest living than the guy who tries to bleed you for those groceries."

Her hand tightened on his arm. "I don't have to tell you how grateful I'll be for anything you can do?"

"What's the best time to see Angelo at his place?"

The blonde shrugged. "Eleven, eleven-thirty. You've got plenty of time."

Liddell reached over, kissed the half open lips. They were soft, moist. She melted against him, held him close. After a moment, he drew back.

"What about your guests?"

The blonde shrugged. "You know Hollywood parties. As long as the liquor holds out, they don't care if they never see the sucker that's lifting the tab."

Liddell reached down caught her lightly in his arms, walked toward the couch. The robe fell open. The brown of her body was criss-crossed by two contrasting white strips outlining the shape of the bikini.

3.

Johnny Liddell took the coastal highway south, a tortuous route that seemed to hug the shoreline most of the way. Somewhere beyond the black abyss that yawned off to the right there was a rumble of surf and the hissing sound of water retreating from the beach.

When his headlights picked out the brass sign announcing *Angelo's* he swung off the macadam through two large stone pillars onto a crushed bluestone driveway which wound and curved its way through a row of trees to the house.

Angelo's turned out to be a sprawling old building that looked like any old home that had been kept up. Shrubs and lawns seemed to be in good condition, and the house itself was bathed in the glow of hidden spotlights. He pulled up to the canopied entrance, turned the rented car over to a

uniformed attendant.

The main hall of the place was filled with small groups of patrons, mostly in evening dress. Overhead, a pall of smoke stirred restlessly in the breeze from the opened door.

Off to the left, one of the original parlors had been converted into a lounge with a bar running the length of one wall. Liddell ambled in, found himself some elbow room at the bar.

He ordered a bourbon on the rocks, turned his back to the bar and looked around. To judge by the number of reel-life faces he recognized in the place, Angelo had obviously become well accepted by the movie colony. When the bartender slid the drink across to him, Liddell dropped a five on the bar.

"Angelo show yet?"

The bartender raised his eyebrows. "Mr. Angelo is here every night, sir. You a friend of his?"

Liddell nodded. "From New York. Name's Liddell."

The bartender picked up the bill from alongside the drink, shuffled to the far end of the bar, rang it up. He was back in a moment with the change. Liddell gave no sign that he saw when the barman a few minutes later picked up a phone from under the bar, muttered a few words into it.

Liddell was just on the verge of ordering a refill when a two hundred pound fashion plate in a midnight blue tuxedo, sporting a red carnation in his buttonhole, sidled up to him. "Mr. Liddell?"

Liddell nodded.

"Mr. Angelo will see you in his office." The way Blue Tuxedo said it, it sounded like getting invited into Mr. Angelo's office was like getting a free pass from St. Peter. "If you'll just come this way."

The office was at the end of the corridor leading off the entrance hall. The man in the tuxedo rapped on a door stencilled *Private* and waited. After a moment, it was opened by Marty, who dismissed the man in the tuxedo with a nod.

The room beyond was comfortably furnished with large, easy chairs, a few tables scattered around. The illumination was provided entirely by lamps, giving the room a warm, intimate glow.

Angelo was sprawled in an easy chair, his feet propped up on a low table. He watched Liddell enter with no show of enthusiasm. Somewhere a radio was spilling soft dance music into the room.

"I thought we said goodbye at the pool this afternoon, shamus," he growled. "We figured you'd be on your way back East by now. Didn't we, Marty?"

Marty, leaning against the door, nodded.

"You didn't think I'd leave without coming out to take a look at your place, did you?"

Angelo reached into a humidor and brought up a cigar. He bit off the end, spat it at the waste basket. "Okay, so now you seen it."

Liddell grinned. "You know, Angelo, it's like you said. This place grows on you. I might stay a while."

The man in the chair stuck the unlit cigar in his mouth, rolled it in the center of his lips between thumb and forefinger. "This ain't your kind of town, Liddell. I don't think the climate would agree with you."

The radio started spouting a commercial.

"You seem to be thriving," Liddell walked over to the humidor, selected a cigar, held it to his nose, then dropped it back in the box.

Angelo scowled at him. "You and me, we're two different kinds of guys. Me, I keep my nose out of other people's business. Like that, like you say, a guy could thrive in this climate." He chewed on his cigar reflectively. "Only you never learned how to do that."

"Sounds dull."

Angelo stretched his feet out, contemplated the high gloss on his shoes. "So you figure you're tough, you can't get hurt. But sometimes when people blow the whistle, they're the ones get hurt."

"You mean my client might get hurt if I don't lay off?"

The man in the chair pulled the cigar from between his teeth, examined the soggy end, pasted a stray leaf back with the tip of his tongue. "Who even knew you had a client?" His eyes rolled up from the cigar to Liddell. "I'm just saying it never did pay to run and yell copper. Even to a shamus. It could make a guy real unpopular."

"A guy?"

Angelo shrugged. "Or a doll. There are guys get their kicks working over dolls. To them, guys or dolls, it don't make no difference. That's the way they get their kicks."

"Like Leo Sullivan?"

"Why don't you ask Leo?"

The announcer on the radio boomed. "—and here she is, the Boswell of the Hollywoods, that see-all, know-all, tell-all reporter, Laura St. Clair." There was a brief fanfare of canned music, then the cloying voice of the columnist filled the room.

Angelo held his hand up. "Just a minute. She's supposed to give the joint a plug tonight. I want to hear it."

He sat, the unlit cigar clenched between his teeth, nodding his head in obvious agreement while the voice on the radio drooled superlatives about his operation. When she finally switched to another subject, Angelo signalled to Marty.

"Not a bad plug. But turn her off. That voice of hers gives me bumps." He turned his attention back to Liddell. "I'm going to give you some advice for free, shamus. Don't crowd us. We don't want no trouble out here, but if we got to have trouble we know how to handle it. Right, Marty?"

The other man's head bobbed obediently.

"Okay, as long as we're giving out with the free advice—me, I get nervous when anybody crowds a client of mine. Real nervous. And when I get nervous, somebody gets hurt."

The man in the chair swung his feet off the low

table, they hit the floor with a thud. "You're threatening Angelo?" He hit his chest with the back of his hand. He got up, walked over to Liddell, stuck his face so close the private detective could smell the garlic on his breath. "Nobody comes into my joint to threaten Angelo."

Liddell studied the club man's face. The years away from New York had made a lot of changes in Angelo, Liddell realized. The wolfishness of his face was blurred by a soft overlay of fat. Flat, lustreless eyes still peered from under heavily veined, thickened eyelids, but the soft pouches under them took away the old menace.

Liddell put his hand against the stocky man's chest and shoved. Angelo reeled backwards; the low table caught him behind the knees, dumped him into a tangle of arms and legs on the floor.

Marty's hand dipped into his pocket, re-appeared with an open switch blade. He shuffled toward Liddell flat-footedly, the blade of the knife upward in the approved knife fighter fashion.

"You're pushing your luck too far, snooper," he growled.

He circled the private detective warily for a moment, then made a sudden lunge. Liddell sidestepped, caught his wrist as the knife whizzed past and twisted.

Marty screamed with pain, spun through the air and landed in a heap at Liddell's feet, the knife skidding across the floor. The private detective reached down, caught a handful of Marty's hair and pulled him to his feet. He sank his left to the cuff in the other man's midsection, chopped viciously at the side of his ear. Marty hit the floor face first, and didn't move.

Liddell walked over to where the knife lay, picked it up, tested the point on the ball of his thumb. He turned to where Angelo was painfully pulling himself to his feet.

"We're not saying we're not in the market to buy," Liddell grunted. "But like they say in the ads —all sales are final."

Angelo's eyes hopscotched sullenly from the knife to Liddell's face and back. "We've got nothing to sell but grief, shamus." He nodded to where Marty lay. "In your case, Marty's liable to want to make it real cheap. Even give it away."

Liddell stepped across the prostrate form of Marty, knife in hand. As he neared Angelo, the club man flattened back against the wall.

"Wait a minute, Liddell, don't do anything crazy. I told you I got nothing to sell." The perspiration was glistening on his upper lip, beads were forming on his forehead. "That's not my line. You know that. I got wheels and the tables downstairs. That's plenty for me."

"Whose line is it, Angelo?"

The stocky man licked at his lips. "I don't stool."

Liddell touched the point of the blade to the soft fat that hung under the other man's neck, nicked the skin. Angelo grunted, touched his finger to the nick, brought away a drop of blood.

"Who's selling?"

"Maybe a buy isn't what's up. Maybe nobody's selling."

Liddell scowled. "You trying to tell me something?"

The club operator shook his head. "I'm not telling you anything. You figure it out for yourself. How much can a real operator get from a take on the black? Two, three, maybe five gees tops? A dame that's the hottest property in town right now under a management contract is good for twenty times that. Maybe more."

Liddell lowered the knife. "So that's the gimmick The shake is just the softener-upper?"

"You didn't get that from me, shamus. I'm no stool."

Liddell grinned at him. "You could fool me."

4.

Lydia Johnson was sitting by the pool when Johnny Liddell returned to her place in Beverly Hills. She wore a light blue dressing gown that made it highly debatable that she wore anything under it. She listened to Liddell's report on the interview with Angelo and frowned.

"Eddie Match?" She chewed on the end of a highly shellacked nail, considered it. "Then it won't be money they'll want, it'll be a management contract."

Liddell sat on the end of the chair, nodded. "That's the way it sounds. What kind of a stable does Match have anyway?"

"A lot of big names. He keeps adding all the time." The frown between the girl's eyes grew deeper. "You think that's the way he gets all his clients? By blackmail?"

Liddell shrugged. "I don't know how else a pimp could get to be a top talent agent so quickly otherwise."

The blonde winced at the word "pimp." She reached for a cigarette, tapped it on the arm of the chair. "One way or another it looks like I'm cut out to peddle my wares for Eddie Match, doesn't it?"

"How about your studio? Would they stand up if there was a showdown and those pictures were circulated?"

"I don't know. They've got an awful lot invested in me, but I don't know if they could afford to stand up against that kind of a blast." She lit the cigarette, blew twin streams through her nostrils. "I'm over a worse barrel than I thought. I guess I've just wasted your time, Liddell. This isn't going to be a single pay-off deal. It looks like I'm hooked from here on in."

Liddell growled deep in his chest. "Maybe not. I still haven't had a talk with Match. Maybe I can persuade him to be nice."

"Nobody, but nobody, talks Eddie Match out of a buck."

"You'd be surprised how persuasive I can be." Liddell reached over, took a drag from her cigarette. "Where's the best place to run into him?"

"He has an office on Sunset. Near La Cienaga. But I don't imagine it will do any good." She reached over, crushed out her cigarette "I don't suppose you heard Laura St. Clair's broadcast tonight?"

"About Angelo's?" Liddell grinned. "What a drool."

The blonde shook her head. "I mean about you."

Liddell scowled. "About me?" He shook his head. "Angelo turned it off right after the plug for his joint. What about me?"

Lydia shrugged. "Oh, she didn't mention you by name, but she warned one of the big studios that one of its stars was flirting with bad headlines by getting mixed up with a notorious private eye. She meant me—and you. By tomorrow, the eager beavers from the studio's publicity department will be begging Laura for details and you'll be ruled off the track."

"That gives us tomorrow to work on Eddie Match."

"You're still game? Laura can throw an awful lot of weight around. She can ruin you in this town. At least in my case the studio will try to protect an investment."

"Like I said, we still have tomorrow."

The blonde stared at him, grinned. "And tonight."

She stood up, there was a soft rustle as she slid the gown back over her shoulders. Her body gleamed in the reflected light, the white strips of untanned skin in sharp contrast to the darkness of her body. Her legs were long, sensuously shaped. Full rounded thighs swelled into high set hips, converged into a narrow waist. Her breasts were full and high, their pink tips straining upward.

"How about a swim?" Her body flashed toward the water, arched gracefully, then disappeared with a splash.

Johnny Liddell grinned, watched until the girl's head broke the water. She flattened out on her back, beckoned to him invitingly. He kicked off his loafers, started tugging at his tie.

5.

At eleven the next morning, Johnny Liddell stepped out of a cab outside a white stucco four-story building on Sunset just off La Cienaga. The air was super-heated and dry from the beaming sun. He pushed through the glass doors, soaked up the coolness of the air conditioning.

The directory in the vestibule offered the information that Edward Match Co., Artists' Representatives, occupied Suite 406. He headed for the one-cage elevator in the rear of the lobby.

On the fourth floor, he plowed through a runner of thick red carpet to the front suite in the building. The reception room was empty except for a girl with patently bleached hair who presided over a switchboard behind a railing that cut the room in two. On the walls, giant-sized photographs of top Hollywood stars, presumably Match clients, were recessed in indirectly lighted frames.

Liddell crossed to the railing. The blonde looked up at him with no show of enthusiasm; she didn't miss a beat on her gum.

"I want to see Match. The name's Liddell."

The girl jabbed at her hair with the tips of her fingers. "Do you have an appointment?"

Liddell grinned, looked around the empty office. "You kidding?"

The girl at the switchboard appeared not to hear. "I'll see if he can see you." She stabbed at a key, murmured into her headphone. She flicked the key upward. "He'll see you."

Eddie Match sat perched on the corner of a highly polished desk that dominated the private office. The end of a toothpick protruded from the corner of his mouth; his eyes were half-lidded discs of expressionless grey slate. He waited while Liddell closed the door behind him, rolled the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Long time no see," Liddell nodded.

"Couldn't be too long." Match was lean, affected carefully tailored suits that showed a complete understanding with his tailor. His hair was beginning to grey, was worn in a closely clipped crew cut. "What's on your mind?"

"Lydia Johnson."

Match pulled the toothpick from between his teeth, studied the macerated end incuriously. "So?"

"She's a client. I'm just passing word around that I don't like my clients leaned on."

The lean man rolled his eyes upward from the toothpick to Liddell. "Meaning?"

"Somebody's trying to hustle my client, Match. Somebody who knows her from the old days, somebody who has a batch of pictures to prove it. I understand there's a price tag on them. We'll go for a price tag, but with no strings."

"I don't make you, Liddell. I do know this. If your client wants to get back these pictures, sending a shamus around to throw muscle isn't the way to do it." He chewed on the toothpick. "If I were handling her—"

"Which you're not."

Match permitted himself a thin-lipped smile around the toothpick. "You never know in this town do you, peeper?" He watched Liddell make himself comfortable in a leather armchair. "Like I said, if I was handling her, maybe I could make a deal with

the people who have the pictures."

"I like my way better," Liddell grunted.

The lean man shook his head. "You're playing out of your league. This isn't New York, where you get a lot of things solved with a .45. This is Hollywood where who you know gets you what you want."

"Maybe I can take a quick course in how to make friends."

Match flipped the toothpick at the waste basket. "You're a little late. Nobody in this town would touch you with a six-foot pole. Maybe you don't listen to Laura St. Clair. But everyone else in this town does."

"She put the finger on me, eh?"

The lean man shrugged. "It figures. Nobody wants to cross Laura by playing ball with a guy who heads her list. The studio finds out she's talking about Lydia Johnson, they bend over backwards to make sure Lydia stays on the right side of St. Clair. The studio's got too much dough tied up in Johnson to let her louse herself up." He hopped off the desk, walked over to the water cooler, helped himself to a cup of water. "Who knows what'll happen when they find out how she made her bread and butter in the old days? A smart agent might be able to keep them from doing something rash—like throwing her out on her can."

"You mean a retired pimp? Or have you retired, Match?"

The color drained from the agent's face. Little lumps formed on his jaw at the corners of his mouth. "I don't have to take that kind of talk from you, peeper. You've been pushing your luck ever since you got into this town. Maybe you'll push it too far."

"Why tell me? Why don't you tell that other important friend of yours? The peeper—Leo Sullivan. Maybe he'll do something about it. Or was he only handy with girls?"

"I'll tell him you were asking."

"Yeah. Do that. I'd hate to go back to New York without a chance to see him."

Match's grin was bleak, strained. "Don't worry. You will."

6.

Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar with the ease of long experience, made concentric circles with the wet bottom of his glass. He checked his watch for the third time, growled under his breath.

He could tell the minute Lydia Johnson entered the bar by the hush that fell over the bar and the adjoining tables. As she walked toward him, the entire room seemed to be releasing its collective breath.

She moved in beside him at the bar. "Am I very late?"

Liddell grinned at her. "Late enough."

The Snow Top ordered a vodka Gibson, pouted at Liddell. "Where have you been all afternoon? I thought you'd come back to my place after you saw Match."

"I've been to the library." He dropped his voice, looked around. "Let's sit down. I think I'm on to something." He indicated an end table to the bartender, led the girl over.

"I've been reading Laura St. Clair's columns in the files. You read them?"

The blonde shrugged, sipped at her drink. "Everyone out here does. It's required reading. Laura packs a lot of weight in this town. She's been out here almost as long as Louella and longer than Hopper."

"You notice how often she uses blind items? Like what well known star's career will be ruined by this scandal or that scandal?"

"They all do. It protects them from a libel action for one thing. For another, it prevents innocent people from getting hurt."

"I wonder how many of those blind items made sense to Eddie Match's clients?"

The blonde stopped with the glass halfway to her lips. "I don't get it."

"Look, someone has been softening up these big names so Match could move in and slough them with that representation deal. How else would a character like Match latch onto so many top clients? And at that rate?"

"You think Laura's mixed up in a shakedown racket?"

"And what a racket. Instead of taking peanuts for payoffs, they take over management of top stars and have a gold mine for life."

The blonde caught her lower lip between her teeth, worried it. "Even if you were right? How do you go about proving it?"

"If I'm right, she must have some of the material in her files." He pulled an envelope from his breast pocket, consulted pencilled notes on the back. "I jotted down six of Match's clients. I'm going to check and double-check her files on them. If I'm right, she'll have something on each of them."

"And me?"

Liddell grinned. "Before I even start checking the rest, I'll find her folder on you and burn it. You're my client. Remember?"

The blonde covered his hand with hers, squeezed. "Be careful, Johnny. It's awful risky." She looked around, made certain no one was within hearing distance. "When do you intend to do it?"

"What time is she on the air?"

"Eleven-fifteen to eleven-thirty every week day."

Liddell winked. "By tomorrow the studio may be putting the heat on you to unload me. Tonight's our only chance. Keep your fingers crossed."

Laura St. Clair had a combination office and apart-

ment in the penthouse of a pile of concrete and plate glass that towered over Wilshire Boulevard.

Johnny Liddell dropped his cab a block away and took his time ambling toward the entrance. The doorman pushed open the heavy glass door, eyed Liddell incuriously, and forgot him a moment later running to open the door of a cab.

Inside the lobby, Johnny Liddell headed for the bank of elevators in the rear. He avoided the cage marked Penthouse, stepped into one of the others. "Ten, please," he told the bored operator.

The cage whirred softly upward, slid to a smooth stop at the tenth floor. Liddell got out, headed for the front of the building. When the doors of the elevator clanged behind him, he reversed his direction and headed for a door at the rear marked Stairway. He climbed the remaining nine flights to the penthouse.

On the staircase he checked his watch. Eleven-ten. Five minutes before Laura St. Clair went on the air to bring her palpitating audience up to date on the doings of the stars. At this moment, Laura St. Clair would be at her mike, checking over her script for the last time before the "On The Air" signal flashed. He estimated that he had a minimum of half to three-quarters of an hour to find what he was looking for.

He listened outside the penthouse door for a moment, then brought a fine, thin rule from his pocket and fitted it to the door. On the second try he was rewarded by a sharp click and the knob turned in his hand. He opened the door, slipped in and closed it behind him.

He waited in the dark for a moment while his eyes adjusted themselves. Then he brought out a fountain-pen light, pierced the darkness with its beam. The room he was in seemed to be a sort of reception room. Two doors led off it in opposite directions. Cautiously, he made his way to one of the doors, pushed it open. It was a small workroom with a cluttered desk, a few filing cabinets and a bank of telephones. He walked to the desk, snapped on a small desk radio, turned it low to the station on which Laura St. Clair broadcast. He caught the closing commercial of the program preceding hers.

By the shaded light of the desk lamp, carefully, methodically, Liddell sifted through the papers on the columnist's desk, then turned his attention to the drawers, found nothing of interest.

There was the sound of three chimes from the radio. Then, an unctuous voice flowed through to announce:

"And now, through the courtesy of Petal, the cream that gives your skin the glow of roses, we bring you that chatterbox of Hollywood, the woman who knows everything about the people you dream about—Miss Laura St. Clair, our see-all, hear-all and tell-all-reporter . . ."

Liddell closed his ears to the monotonous patter of the announcer, turned his attention to the filing cabinets. He checked the folder on Lydia Johnson, found the usual innocuous studio biography, a few typed items, obviously from her press agent. The files of the other six names, the names of Eddie Match's clients, were equally innocuous. Liddell growled under his breath, looked around for the possible hiding place for the kind of explosive material contained in the blackmail piece on Lydia Johnson.

Foot by foot he examined the panelling of the wall. A section behind the desk gave off a hollow sound. He put his head close to it, rapped it again, grunted his satisfaction. There was a hollow space behind the panelling. A careful search of the entire surface revealed a cleverly disguised button on the baseboard. When he pressed on it, the entire section of panelling slid back. A small, squat filing cabinet was contained in the space behind the wall.

He pulled open the drawer, fumbled through the folders, came up with one marked "Lydia Johnson." Inside it were the originals and negatives of the photos he had seen in the girl's home.

Laura St. Clair's voice sounded louder than it had, intruding itself on Liddell's consciousness. He turned back to the radio. It was still a low mumble.

Then Laura St. Clair said again, in a loud tone, "Don't move."

7.

Liddell started, looked to the door, where the columnist stood covering him with a business-like looking automatic. He looked from her to the radio and back.

"You don't know much about radio technique, do you, Liddell? We do our east coast broadcast at 7:15 to allow for the difference in time. Then, very often, we do the west coast rebroadcast from tape." The gun in her hand was steady. "I did underestimate you, though. How'd you tumble to what we were doing?"

Liddell shrugged. "That article you used to shake Johnson with. It was a real pro job. Neither Match nor Russo could have written it and they certainly wouldn't cut some hack writer in on it. That plus the fact that someone with real pull was herding the clients into Match's agency."

The columnist waved him away from the desk with the snout of the gun. "Now you're a real problem," she sighed. "I can't very well have you running around knowing what you do, can I?"

Liddell shrugged. "You could shoot me while I was trying to take the gun away from you. That's always a good one."

The woman considered, shook her head. "There might be too many questions. No, I guess it will have to be some place away from here. As far as

possible." She waved the gun at the far wall. "Walk over to that wall. Keep your hands where I can see them." She followed him to the blank wall with the snout of the gun. "Stand about an arm's length away, then lean forward on tiptoe and support yourself against the wall with your fingertips."

Liddell leaned forward, supported himself with his fingertips. While he was off balance, the woman walked up behind him, slid her arm around him and tugged his .45 from its holster.

"How long do I stand like this?"

The woman laughed. "Not too long. I'm going to have somebody come over for you." He could hear her at the telephone as she tapped the cross bar. "Helene? Miss St. Clair. You know that little arrangement I have for smuggling in my contacts without anybody seeing them? That's right. Have the penthouse elevator left at the basement level." She listened for a moment. "No, that'll be all right. My visitor will leave the same way. You can have the cage left in the basement overnight. I won't be using it again tonight. Thank you, my dear." She dropped the receiver on its hook. "Any questions, Liddell?"

The private detective shook the perspiration out of his eyes and swore.

The woman chuckled, dialed a number. "Leo? This is St. Clair. You'd better come over to my place right away." There was a brief pause. "I don't care how busy you are. I came back to my place unexpectedly and found your friend Liddell going through my files." She waited a moment. "That's right. Liddell. How soon?" She grunted her assent. "The penthouse elevator will be at the basement level. Don't let anyone see you coming up here." She dropped the receiver on its hook.

Liddell tried to blink the blinding stream of perspiration from his eyes. The ache in his fingers had translated itself to his arms and shoulders. He took it as long as he could, then his knees threatened to give way under him. He managed to hold out for another three minutes, then his knees folded, dumping him into a heap on the floor.

"Not bad," Laura St. Clair grunted. "You lasted almost five minutes. Three is par for the course."

Liddell managed to get one lead-heavy arm to his face, swabbed at the perspiration that glistened on it. He watched while she screwed a cigarette into a holder, tilted it in the corner of her mouth and touched a match to it. The gun was never more than inches away from her hand.

"If you're thinking of trying anything, Liddell," she blew smoke at him, "forget it. By the time you got the knots out of your legs, you'd never make it."

She was on her second cigarette when there was a cautious knock on the door.

"Come on in. It's open," she called.

Leo Sullivan was tall, heavy-set, his shoulders stooped so that his hands seemed to dangle in ape-like nearness to his knees. His low hairline, the coarseness of his black hair and the tufts that stuck out of his nostrils and ears added to the ape-like effect. He grinned when he saw Liddell on the floor, his back against the wall.

"Eddie Match says you been asking about me, shamus." He walked over, caught Liddell by the hair, pulled him to his feet.

The private detective's legs felt as though they had been transfused with red-hot lead. His knees showed signs of an inability to support his weight. He stood swaying, his face glistening wth perspiration.

"That's quite a parlor trick Laura has, eh shamus?" He turned his attention to the woman. "You got his gun?"

Laura nodded, pulled open her desk drawer, took out the .45. She handed it over to the ape-like man. "You got a car?"

Sullivan nodded, hefted the .45 in the palm of his hand. "Nice iron." He slid it into his jacket pocket. "Maybe I'll keep it as a souvenir."

"It has to look like an accident, Leo. "We don't want any heat over this." She glanced over at Liddell. "A fatal accident."

Liddell flexed his fingers cautiously, winced at the sharp tongue of flame that shot to his shoulders. The muscles in his back and legs screamed with pain, brought fresh beads of perspiration to his forehead and upper lip. Disregarding the pain, he continued to flex his fingers, managed to work some feeling into them.

"You're sure he's light?" Leo ran his hands over Liddell's pockets expertly, came up with the switchblade knife he had taken away from Angelo's stooge, Marty. The ape-like man flicked open the blade, whistled softly. "A real edge. Guy could do a lot of damage with an edge like this," he remonstrated with the columnist. "You ought to be more careful, Laura."

"I got his gun, didn't I? How should I know he'd be carrying a knife as well?" She rolled her eyes to Liddell. "I guess we won't be seeing any more of each other, Liddell. It's like I told you at Johnson's party. If you behave and work with Laura, you can work this town." She shrugged. "You had other ideas." She laid her gun down on the desk, set about changing the cigarette in her holder.

For a moment, Sullivan's eyes left Liddell. He figured the chances of reaching the gun on the desk, forced his tortured muscles into a leap at it. The columnist was taken by surprise, yelled a warning to Sullivan.

He straightened up, saw what was happening. Almost as a reflex he reversed the knife in his hand, whipped it at Liddell. The private detective could hear it whiz as it went past his head. Some place there was a muffled gasp.

Liddell had no chance to find out what was happening. His fingers closed on Laura's gun as Sullivan went for his pocket, tried to pull the .45 loose. Liddell's fingers tightened around the trigger. The little automatic spat viciously. Sullivan fielded all three shots with his midsection. There was a surprised look on his face as he laced his fingers across his belly in a futile attempt to stem the red tide that was already seeping through his fingers.

His knees sagged, his eyes glazed. He pitched forward, hit the floor face first and didn't move.

Painfully, slowly, Liddell swung around to face the woman who stood behind him.

The columnist's lips were pulled away from her teeth in a ghastly caricature of a grin. The handle of the knife protruded from her abdomen like some obscene horn. She had wrapped both hands around the handle, trying to tug it free. She swayed for a moment, toppled to the ground.

She was dead by the time Liddell reached her.

He walked back to the hidden file, emptied it of its folders. Then he slid the panel back into place. He started painfully for the door, stopped to glance back at the tableau.

Then, as if by afterthought, he walked back, placed the gun that had killed Sullivan alongside the dead columnist's hand. He slid a sheet of paper into the typewriter, started to type slowly, painfully. After a moment, with a grunt, he straightened up, read what he had written:

"The column has just learned that Edward Match, who has built his talent agency with amazing speed in this town, has a long and unsavory criminal record in the East. He has threatened to—"

He broke off, grinned. Then, sticking the folders under his arm, he stepped across the outstretched form of Leo Sullivan, and headed for the special elevator and the car that was waiting by the basement door.

Repeater

William Grooms, 36, was kept in the Kalamazoo, Mich., jail six days on a five-day sentence for public intoxication. He was given $3 by the county to offset the mistake. He spent the money for liquor, was again arrested and received a 30-day sentence.

"None So Blind—"

The beauty of blond actress Ilona Massey as she drove from Chicago to Washington, D. C., in her white convertible was evident, since the car had no license plates. The police in Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and most of Maryland had eyes only for Miss Massey. Finally, only eight miles from her home in Bethesda, Md., a policeman noticed the absence of plates. The actress explained that she had bought the car in Chicago and the dealer told her she didn't need plates to drive it home. Police gave her a ticket and impounded the car.

On the House

Two bandits robbing the Oyster Bar in Detroit of $450 were repeatedly annoyed by an intoxicated, persistent customer who insisted the holdup men buy him a drink. Finally one of the robbers tossed a fifth of whiskey to the patron, who failed to catch it. When the bottle smashed on the floor, the bandits fled.

by

JOSEPH

COMMINGS

CLAY PIGEON

I've got an easy job. Not too much work, and good pay. I kill people.

My business is committing murder. And there's only one way for me to be a success. I never kill anybody I know. That makes it easier.

The word was passed to me that I was needed for a job in New York City. I flew in from Milwaukee. I'm an out-of-town gun, but I know my way around most of the big cities.

The waterfront was having a jurisdictional strike. I was hired to get rid of the opposing dock union leader. Two thousand dollars for the job, a thousand before and a thousand after. I didn't ask any questions about the strike. That was their business. The less I knew the better.

The bird dog pointed out James Harrower, put the finger on him for me. A tough guy, he told me. Like a lot of union leaders. Harrower packed a gun, all the time. I was to do the rest alone. I wanted to pick him off as he crossed the sidewalk from his HQ over the greasy Greek restaurant to his car.

I wasn't nervous, didn't even smoke. I had my gun resting on the seat beside me in the car. I didn't use an automatic like some of these cheap junkies. An automatic can't be accurate over fifteen yards. I used the .38 calibre Police Positive I'd taken from a dead cop in Las Vegas. I had killed him.

After the shooting, I'd ditch the car I was driving.

It'd been doctored so that it couldn't be traced.

Harrower came out of the HQ. Damn the luck, he had several of his boys with him and I couldn't angle a shot in among them. I work clean, and I didn't want any loose ends like those boys lying around.

They drove off, I tailing them. They took Harrower to Penn Station and dropped him off into more crowds. He went on alone. I quit the car, deserted it, and followed Harrower into the jammed terminal, the revolver in my topcoat pocket.

He had a commuter's ticket. I didn't know where he was going. I got on the train, in the same coach, with him. When the conductor came along punching tickets, I told him I hadn't had time to stop at the ticket window.

When he asked, "Where you going?" I said, "All the way."

By now, it looked as if I'd have to go all the way.

The conductor gave me a punched ticket and took my money.

I didn't take my eyes off Harrower. From now on I'd be glued to him till I got my chance. He read an evening newspaper. He didn't seem worried. He was somewhat plumpish and clear-skinned. Good living. Not bad looking. The kind of guy who has a buck and knows how to spend it right to live cozy. Well, whatever he had, he wasn't going to take any of it with him.

He got off at Massapequa. I got off behind him.

It was twilight. The bright lamps of the station were lit. There were people around. He walked to a low-slung ranch wagon in the parking zone. There was a good-looking woman at the wheel. She greeted him with a kiss. He got in and they went sweetly up the road. Looking sharply, I managed to see the name *Whitebirches* designed on the door of the wagon.

I wasn't in any hurry. I strolled around and in three-quarters of an hour I found *Whitebirches* on a quiet street.

Harrower was in his shirt-sleeves, sprinkling the reseeded lawn with an orange plastic hose. There were two kids playing around the side of the elegant split-level house, a boy and a girl, and the boy was riding a red tricycle.

I heard Harrower's wife call to him from around the back.

I faded into the shadows of the bordering oaks and soon lined up Harrower, his wife, and a neighbor couple, all gathered around an outdoor barbecue pit. I could smell the aroma of grilled steaks. I could nearly taste the charcoal flavor in my mouth. I told you this guy knew how to live.

The friends from over the back fence were all chatting and laughing. I could hear snatches of talk. Harrower was going to plant more shrubs. "*Viburnum plicatum*," he said with a laugh. "Oriental snowballs." He'd even learned to call some of them by their Latin names. His wife chimed in to say that she was going to try to take prizes with her zinnias this year in the garden club.

They sent the kids into the house early to go to bed.

The spring night was chilly and I turned up my coat collar.

There was always somebody with him. But I could wait. I wanted to get him alone.

At last the barbecue broke up. The neighbors went home and the Harrowers went into their house and closed the door.

I was cold. I went back to Massapequa and rented a room, but first I had a snack in an all-night drug store. I was starved.

Next day was Sunday. Harrower didn't go into the city. He took the family to the little Episcopalian church in the ranch wagon. I had to walk. I stood outside the church and listened to the hymns. After the service Harrower, his wife, and the two kids came out and he bought Sunday papers from the hawker on the corner. He gave the kids the funnies. Then he drove them down the street to the bakery and waited outside, smoking an old bulldog pipe at the wheel of the ranch wagon, while his wife went inside to buy rolls and cake for breakfast.

Then they all drove home. I didn't have a chance at him. Too many people around.

After breakfast he went out in back in old pants and shirt and puttered around with his horticultural kit. His kids were out there too, and so were those damn neighbors. The boy kid had an archery set and Harrower showed him how to shoot off a few arrows. One of the arrows came skimming over close to me and I had to duck farther back among the oaks and birches to avoid being seen.

Harrower walked over toward me to get the arrow. After he pulled it out of the birch trunk he stood there for a long moment, relighting his pipe.

I remained hidden, watching him in a fascinated way. I forgot my gun till it was too late. He'd walked back again and joined his wife behind the house.

Why the hell didn't I get him when I had the chance?

I was slipping. I watched him all day and I didn't get another chance. I was slipping.

He went in for dinner late in the afternoon. I crept as close as I dared to the house to look in on him. After dinner the whole family sat around and watched TV. His wife was a little tardy, because she had to wash up the dishes in the kitchen.

It got dark early and nobody went out again that day.

I went back to my room.

I sat there in the dark, just staring out at the auto lights going by in the street. This wasn't me. This wasn't me at all.

I took out the Police Positive and looked at it in the gloom. Why hadn't I used it on Harrower this

morning when he came over by himself to get the arrow? I'd hesitated—and missed a good set-up. Was I losing my nerve? No, I wasn't losing my nerve. I could kill the first punk that stepped in my door.

But this was something else. I wouldn't *know* just any punk. But I was getting to *know* Harrower. Before this, it was just see 'em and shoot. I'd studied Harrower too long. White birches, good-looking wife, boy on a red tricycle, barbecued steak, oriental snowballs, zinnias, Episcopalian church, funnies, the old pants and the old pipe, the good living.

I had too many things to remember about him.

What was I going to do about it?

I went to bed and tossed all night. When I dozed off I had bad dreams.

I was up early, getting dressed, shivering in the cold morning.

I knew what I had to do. I didn't even stop for breakfast. I walked straight to Harrower's house, heading for his front doorway. The walking warmed me. I felt better.

I turned in across the newly reseeded front lawn. Harrower was at the garage door with his wife, opening it. Both had spring coats on.

"Harrower!" I said. My voice was hoarse, unused.

Both of them turned to look at me.

I was going to walk right up to him and tell him he was in danger. I'd been hired to gun him, but I'd changed my mind. To hell with that gang in New York. The laugh'd be on them. I had their thousand and they'd never find me again. I'd warn him.

I was playing it straight. I'd even left my gun back in my room.

"Harrower!"

Harrower's face turned grim. He dug into his pocket and came up with a .32 in his fist.

I'd scared him. He'd reached for that gun of his automatically.

I heard his wife scream.

"Harrower!" I started to run toward them faster.

I knew him. I couldn't kill him.

But he didn't know me!

I heard a sound like a pinprick exploding the universe.

He could kill me!

Memory Lapse

Herman L. Crockett, staff member of the Ft. Sam Houston, Tex., post engineer's office, was ticketed for running a stop sign. In court he said: "I don't know why in the world I ran that sign. I'm the man that put it up."

Last Straw

Mrs. Grace Sebastian, of North Sacramento, Calif., was the victim of repeated thefts over a period of six weeks. The thefts included a $100 watch, $80 in cash, $100 worth of liquor and gas from her car. She never took the trouble to report the thefts to police.

Finally the thieves went too far. "Of course I was annoyed by these other thefts," she told officers, "but when they took my seven books of trading stamps I got mad. I licked every stamp myself."

Made to Order Escape

Emil Jantti, 53, serving 30 days in the Cheshire County Jail at Westmoreland, N. H., was sent to repair a hole in the fence around the jail. Instead, he walked through the opening to freedom. He spent two days in the woods, then went home to nearby Winchester. After supper, Jantti's wife convinced him he should surrender and drove him back to the jail.

MYSTERY FANS: Can You Solve This Puzzle?

AURORA DELL, $50-an-hour model, is found by hotel maid . . . strangled! Doctor says she died about 10:30 P.M. That same rain-swept night, the cops grill 3 "admirers". All have alibis . . .

JOE AMES says he dined with Aurora and took her right home in the rain. Then he went back to his place, had a drink, and fell asleep. Admitted he and Aurora had a little "tiff".

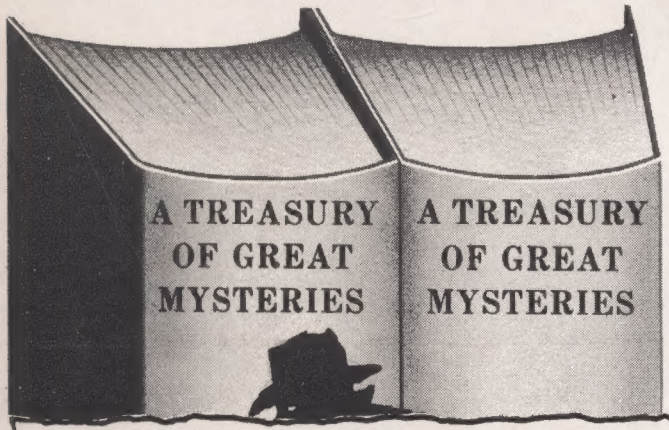
JACK BROWN, nightclub owner, says he was alone in his office from early evening until midnight. Admits knowing Aurora, but denies seeing her that night, or leaving his office at all.

BILL COLE, her jealous ex-boyfriend, said he had been out "on the town" most of the night. Claims he saw Aurora having dinner with Ames; also says they were arguing bitterly.

One of the three men is the murderer, and a picture clue proves that he is lying to the police.

Who is he: AMES? BROWN? or COLE?

Send us the murderer's name . . . and you'll get this



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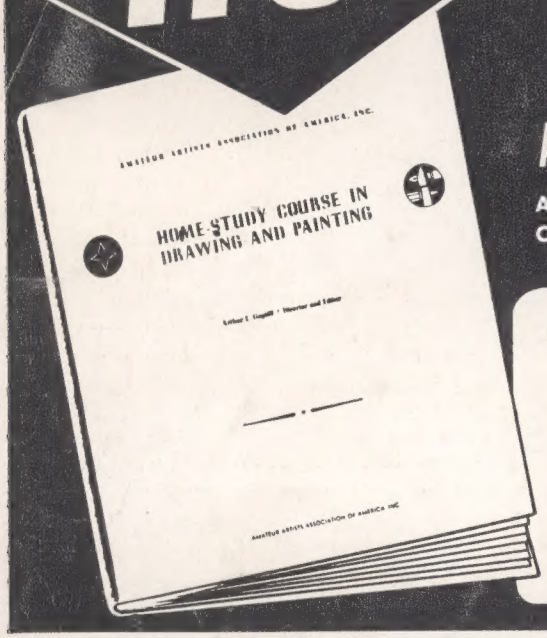

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